Burn In Hades

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION (SNEAK PEEK)

THE VAUDEVERSE SAGA
BOOK ONE

MICHAEL MARTIN

VAUDEVERSE

Copyright © 2026 by Michael Martin

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Formatted with Vellum

WELCOME TO THE EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW!

You are reading a special **12-chapter sneak peek** of the newly revised and polished **Burn In Hades (10th Anniversary Edition)**.

This sampler contains Chapters 1 through 12, giving you an early look at the updated world, enhanced scenes, and refined lore.

It's a substantial preview (nearly half the book!), but Cross's journey across the Underworld is going to cut off abruptly when you hit the end of this excerpt.

Looking for the complete journey?

I don't keep my books on traditional retail platforms or algorithmic storefronts—I sell them directly from my own independent ecosystem.

So, if you love the gritty, mythic atmosphere and want to

see how the story actually ends, you can grab the complete 37-chapter novel directly from me, right now.

👉 **UNLOCK THE FULL NOVEL AT:**
vaudeverse.com/access/starter-pack/

Enjoy the preview!

GET YOUR FREE VAUDEVERSE CODEX

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF
WITH VAUDEVERSE LORE

Confused by the Rules of the Underworld?

If you're reading along and find yourself scratching your head over unique concepts like the Ruach, the terror of Second Death, or the strange ways the Underworld handles human memories—don't worry, I've got your back!

The Vaudeverse Saga is an expansive, highly detailed world with its own set of physics, and I explicitly design my stories to challenge you rather than hold your hand.

And to help you keep your bearings while navigating the sulfur and grit, I built a public field guide on my website. It's a wiki for the world-building, completely free for you to use whenever a term leaves you questioning what just happened.

👉 **DECRYPT LORE AT:**
vaudeverse.com/vaudesy/codex/
(No download. View it in your browser.)

CHAPTER 1
COTTONTAIL

1 - STARVING TO SECOND DEATH

Rest in peace, my ass.

The afterlife proved to be far from dull. It contained moments of tedium and futility but also offered boundless opportunities for adventure and discovery.

Cross found himself in an unusual situation. He teamed up with an inexperienced goddess, a stubborn monster, and a sentient tree to rain food from the sky.

It was like the setup of a joke, with the punchline looming ahead.

Cross surveyed the blazing sky from his vantage point atop the palace's observation tower.

As usual, a spectacular display of firestorms swirled in the sky. Lightning explosions forked down with a burst of smoke and cinders. And a sustained roar reverberated through the firmament as thunder boomed.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Cross squinted, peering through the clouds of smoke.

His eyes strained to make out any faint shape soaring in the flames as hunger gnawed at his insides, threatening to devour his nephesh from the inside out.

When he was alive, Cross worked as a lowly servant for a wealthy family of three on their vast ranch estate. However, in death, his insatiable hunger enslaved him with a hollow emptiness that could never be filled.

However, he held onto hope that once he reached Paradise, things would change for the better. Sadly, Paradise seemed impossibly distant at the moment.

Cross scoured the maelstrom of flames in a desperate search for the only provenance to appease his insatiable hunger. A creature known as a barbot was famed throughout the Underworld for its succulent astral layers.

Then he saw it, soaring through the chaotic blaze and the treacherous clouds of toxic fumes.

The giant featherless bird steered with acute precision through the shroud of smoke and embers, impervious to the scorching heat and unperturbed by its violent ferocity.

From that distance, it appeared no larger than the tip of Cross's thumb. However, any average adult barbot was at least the size of a stallion.

Cross's mouth watered, anticipating an overdue meal. He and his companions hadn't eaten in several sleep cycles.

He gazed at the ball court one final time. Down below, Cottontail remained hidden under the sprawling branches of the rambling tree, as Cross had instructed her.

Cross had been protecting and training the tiny goddess for several sleep cycles. He appreciated her eagerness to help, but she was still learning the ways of the Underworld and often hindered his efforts with her naïveté. It was best she just stayed out of the way.

Once Cross gave the signal, Bolon-Hunahpu, the

mystical talking tree, would hurl a bushel of calabash from its branches and knock the bird down to the ancient ball court, where they could easily procure it before another spirit stole it.

If Cross had access to a rifle, he could have shot it out of the fiery heavens in one shot. But he had to rely on the aim of a dimwitted talking tree, fixed in the abandoned ball court, who had already failed him too many times along with Cottontail.

The closer to the ball court the bird landed, the better. However, Cross's monstrous pet, Gimlet, was prepared to hunt down the carcass, no matter where it landed.

Once obtained, Cross would use his obsidian blade from the knife house to cut and divide the fowl among them so they might savor a decent meal for once.

Simple enough. But nothing was ever simple in the Underworld.

Satisfied that everyone was in position, Cross turned his attention back to the barbot in the fiery skies above.

He raised his hand, silently conveying to the tree that it was time to aim and await the prearranged cue.

Bolon-Hunahpu stood erect; his branches pulled back above Cottontail's head. Its skeletal limbs were barren of all foliage; its bark flaked off like cinders from a fire.

Every breath of wind was potent enough to alter the shot's trajectory, so Cross had to be precise lest the plan dissolved in a cloud of smoke and his efforts be rendered moot.

A searing pain plunged through his midsection like an iron hook had been driven into his belly and twisted with vicious intent. His legs buckled beneath him as a wave of hunger-induced agony swelled in his stomach like a storm at sea.

He clamped his hands together and drove his fists into his abdomen in a desperate plea for relief. The blow stole the air from his lungs, and the unseen pests writhing around in his depths ceased their thrashing, though their growling remained unchanged.

Starvation would never kill him because he was already dead. Still, his inner agonies would persistently torment his three energy bodies: Conscience, Fellowship, and Intuition, culminating in endless sickness, eternal debility, and everlasting madness.

With a sudden snap, a bushel of calabash hurtled skyward toward the giant bird.

Cross hadn't signaled the tree to launch the fruit, but it was too late.

The calabash collided with the barbot, and the creature spiraled out of control, plummeting from the fiery depths above like a blazing comet. It crashed through twisted branches and vanished into the thick brush of the haunted garden.

Cross bellowed to the ancient winding tree with all his might, his words rumbling throughout the palace grounds like a thunderous clap of a god's wrath. "I've got two words for you! Royal hearth!"

The tree curled its branches as if to shrug off its clumsiness, almost defiant despite Cross's reprimand.

The tree must have understood by now that Cross wouldn't follow through with his empty threat because Cross relied on the tree far more than the other way around. Being a tree, its survival didn't require any support from him, while Cross required its aid for his sustenance.

Gimlet raced across the ball court, Cottontail firmly astride, bouncing on the saddle uncontrollably.

She was not supposed to be riding Gimlet.

The beast's hooves created dust clouds as it disappeared into the cursed garden.

"Nobody can follow basic instructions today!" Cross said.

His nephesh plunged into a fearful abyss. If any harm befell her, he could never enter Paradise.

2 - THE GARDEN OF ONE DEATH AND SEVEN DEATH

The dusty air swirled around Cross as he staggered to his feet, his obsidian blade locked in his grasp.

He descended the jagged stairs of the long-forgotten tower. His footsteps echoed through the shadowy halls of the temple of skulls as he carved an unobstructed path toward the front door. He stomped into the drab courtyard, where dull gray clouds threatened to rain blood at any moment.

The inferno that had taken the sky by storm seared his surroundings, swathing him in the oppressive heat. The palace grounds glowed as if imbued with a thousand flaming furnaces, radiating withering intensity and scorching his ruach like an expanse of dry prairie land in midsummer. Humidity cloaked him as if the air had just been relieved of the burden of a fierce summer thunderstorm.

He sprinted across the expansive palace grounds, his feet pounding the soil beneath him.

The imposing edifice dominated Xibalbá's sprawling domain, and its surrounding buildings sprawled out majestically. The infamous temple of skulls stood as an ominous

divider between the ball court and the twisted garden where unspeakable horrors lurked in every shadow.

Cross headed toward the garden of brittle weeds and tangled foliage, his grip tightening around the hilt of his obsidian blade.

Bolon-Hunahpu had once referred to the weapon as a macuahuitl. Its name held little relevance to Cross. All that mattered was its potency and danger, which the sentient tree assured were formidable indeed; it lauded the destructive power of the macuahuitl, proclaiming the blade's obsidian edges could severe three energy bodies of the ruach in one clean swipe.

But not with Cross at the helm; he did not excel at swordsmanship. He was a much better shot with guns and preferred the distance they placed between him and his enemies.

The macuahuitl was not a sword, fashioned neither of metal nor curved into a traditional blade—the weapon itself was a narrow handle with a wider rectangular club at the top, embedded with a row of obsidian blades along the length of both sides of the thick wooden paddle. But one knife had gone missing, having fallen out of the grooves the last time Cross wielded it against giant ants that stole a barbot from them. Across the club's flat surface were serpentine designs on one side and a Jaguar on the other, images that belied its power to tear down even an immortal being immune to life or death. It could cut through the spirits in the shadows but never send them back to the Master in the Underworld.

The last time Cross wielded the weapon, it had caused immense harm to the ruach, though it had failed to penetrate its nephesh. If trouble arose, his only recourse would

be to cut through those lingering shadows of death and flee for his very afterlife.

Cross ascended the stone ramp, each step echoing through the garden of One Death and Seven Death. An unnatural chill filled the air, starkly contrasting the relentless heat from the sky above.

The withered weeds, somehow thriving in the atmosphere of death and decay, swayed around Cross—three times as tall as him. None possessed the slightest trace of green—only shades of ghostly pale and deathly dark, arranged together like an unruly mob encircling a runaway slave. Gnarled vines snaked around the headless statues of long-forgotten deities, shielding them from most of the scorching heat of the sky. They formed a canvas of shadow that lingered throughout the garden, wrapping Cross in the tranquil shade.

Though the temperature was a small mercy, providing some respite from the blistering sky overhead, he could not savor it. He had to find Gimlet and Cottontail, retrieve their food, and escape from the cursed garden as quickly as possible.

But before he ventured any deeper, Cross whistled for Cottontail, though his call came back unanswered.

The weeping of unseen spirits rose from the shadows, making it almost impossible to detect if Cottontail attempted to call forth a response.

The weeping of the spirits was like a funeral march, somber and sorrowful. Each sob resounded in the dark abyss with boundless misery, reverberating until it faded into a low and melancholic tune. They wept for their beloved departed and cursed fate, their voices quivering from the depths of their souls. It was an eerie sound, the

symphony of the damned, and its oppressive presence hung heavy over the garden.

Cross swung the mighty macuahuitl and cleaved through the weeds with a fury. With each thrust, the dried stalks broke apart like brittle kindling sticks, dispersing fibers on the ground in an ashen mist. Statuesque weeds that once stood upright were now relegated to nothing more than flattened grass and decapitated stems, ready to be carried away on a gust of wind. Fine dust clouded the air and clung to the sweat on his face, and he trampled the crushed plants underfoot, churning them into mushy slime that sloshed beneath his boots.

The further Cross journeyed into the garden, the cries of the weepers grew increasingly louder, like a plea to the Great Goddess to take pity on their sorrowful state.

It was a fruitless effort. Magna Mater only favored those who persevered with courage and resilience, like Cross. Lingering in sadness accomplished nothing. He had no idea why these poor souls were stuck in this forsaken place, but every soul chose its circumstances, knowingly or unknowingly.

Cross halted at the sight of a stagnant pond, glistening with pestilence. Some archaic god must have soaked their deified feet in its murky waters ages ago.

A stone sculpture of a head lay next to the putrid pool, its gaping jaws painting a wicked smirk. The rest of the statue was missing.

Cross trilled for Cottontail again, but the weepers' anguished cries filled the dreary terrain, muffling whatever answer he might receive from the girl.

Cross hoisted the statue's decapitated head. "I'll give you something to cry about." He hurled the head into the

abyss of darkness, aiming in the general direction of the plaintive spirits.

The granite head erupted out of the black, and Cross found himself sprawled on the ground before he could register the blunt force it inflicted upon his skull.

The world spun around him as he attempted to comprehend the situation.

The boulder had pulverized his skull in the softest part of his forehead. He massaged the area, and a sorrowful gaze met him beneath the murky pond water beside him.

He scarcely knew the form that stared back. He had become a shade of his former self—pale, haggard, and phantom-like. A menacing void pierced through his forehead where the fatal blow had been dealt. After all these centuries in the Underworld, he still could not shake off the reminder of his thirty-eight years of life that had so alarmingly ended.

He slammed his fist into the pond's surface, shattering his image.

It was then that Cross noticed another reflection. A figure loomed behind him, a twisted expression etched into her face.

He turned slowly to find Cottontail leering back, her skeletal frame illuminated by an unknown light. As a goddess, she appeared far more alive than any of the damned. And despite her heavenly origin, Cross treated her like a nine-year-old child because of her physical appearance.

However, Cottontail delighted in telling him she was much older than he and could regale him with ancient tongues of epochs long forgotten, cataclysmic events that shook the foundations of the universe, and various stages of maturity she had endured throughout her existence as if

she were thousands of years old. But as Cross often noted, it was all just gibberish of an inexperienced child.

He attempted to rise from the dirt, but his unsteady feet betrayed him, still reeling from the vicious jolt to his skull.

She crumpled beside him, her petite fingers trembling as she brushed his muddied cheeks. Her warmth radiated through his ruach as she cradled his face in her tiny hands.

Despite his averted gaze, she held fast to his face, undeterred. The warmth of her caress seeped into his weary soul, stirring a spark of hope.

But he'd already steeled himself against it, pushing her away with a violent brush of his arm. "Ain't the first time I butted heads with anyone."

"That's because you haven't figured out what 'heaping coals of fire' really means."

"Have you ever heard the word precocious?" Cross asked.

"My mother said I invented the concept when I came into being." She clenched his arm and lent her aid to heave him upright.

Cross bore the brunt of the strain, relying on his sinews while her slight frame and meager muscles could only offer nominal support.

As he shakily rose to stand, the garden seethed with animosity, a feral hiss like a mob of furious assailants advancing to avenge their comrade's demise.

"The weepers don't want you here," Cottontail said.

Cross attempted to rein in his amusement, yet the absurdity of the circumstance was overwhelming, and he could not restrain himself. A deep chortle emanated from his chest, bouncing off the icy atmosphere of the garden and shattering the rancor of moments before. It was an

incongruous sound that brought comfort in a time of tribulation.

"A realm where I'm not wanted?" he said. "That's a first." His laughter ebbed, the air in the garden growing heavy as he assumed a more paternalistic stance towards Cottontail. "You're the one who shouldn't be here. I told you to wait at the ball court. Why the hell were you riding Gimlet?"

"She was afraid to enter the garden," Cottontail said.

"She ain't afraid of nothin'."

"She puts on a brave face for you. But she only came here because I promised to come with her."

"And where is she now?"

Cottontail's slender shoulders rose and fell, her slight frame illuminated by the soft motion. "I fell, and she ran off."

Cottontail's gaze wandered around the garnde with apprehension, sadness, and sheer disappointment. Her lips were downturned at their edges, and her shoulders slumped in submission. Despair pooled in her once vibrant eyes, revealing the ineffable anguish that her beloved pet fled from this desolate place, leaving her alone.

"Are you hurt?" Cross asked.

"I was going to ask you the same thing?"

Cross laid his hand on his stomach as he felt a growing sensation of tormenting hunger overcome him. A rumbling rocked his inner being as if it came from the depths of his nephesh and filled the surrounding space. It was like a distant roar of thunder carried on the wind in the darkest hours of the night.

"I'll be much better," he said, "when we find that damn bird."

"It's over here." Cottontail led Cross further along, their trek marked by the scattered remains of calabashes.

The sleek emerald shells had been ripped apart and ruptured, and the putrid nectar within them poured out onto the ground like blood from a sacrificial offering.

Then, far in the bowels of the garden, they stumbled upon the barbot. It stood half-hidden by ragged vines, entangled in the clutches of weeds, rustling in a flurry of movement. Its beady, dark red eyes flared, scanning its surroundings. It might've seen them coming long before they saw it.

Cross marveled at the glossy sheen of the featherless brown hide of the barbot. The wrinkled texture was a typical feature of one of these species, but this specimen seemed to have been spared that trait. Its astral surface appeared less calloused and almost smooth.

"Hey there, beauty," Cross said.

"Looks like a big ol' saddle bag to me," Cottontail said. "Like all the others."

Cross had seen uglier barbots, and if Cottontail were fortunate enough to make it to Paradise with him, she would bear witness to them along the way.

The Underworld teemed with these scaly avians, which reminded Cross of what dragons might look like—only in miniature, without their imposing horns or deadly capability of spewing fire. Barbots were gentle creatures in comparison.

And had it not been for his gnawing hunger, Cross would have vaulted onto the barbot's powerful back with Cottontail to soar straight to Paradise. But then again, each time he had ever gone aloft, some rapacious spirit or another had invariably shot him out of the skies, leaving them to squabble over the meat. And such was how things

were even before the accursed wars broke out. Spiritual warfare was a perpetual state these days, and the dangers of being brought down by courageous soldiers only intensified it all. Yet, even if such risks did not exist, despite flight being a much faster form of transportation, he refused to forsake his dear Gimlet on their harrowing journey.

"We need Gimlet," Cross said. "This barbot is too heavy to carry back to the palace."

Cottontail cupped her hands around her mouth, and her calls for her pet rang out, her voice echoing through the garden, cheerful yet determined. The words "Gimlet! Here, girl!" rippled as if from one end of the Underworld to the other. It was like a songbird's chirp but amplified a million times over—a deep and powerful yell that pierced the air, reverberating off the trees and into eternity. Her eyes were bright and alert, darting from side to side in desperate search of her beloved pet.

"Shhh!" Cross surveyed the darkness, the cruel embrace of the skeletal trees imprisoning him in an impenetrable shroud of gloom.

His eyes traced the splintering trunks to the shriveled shrubs and tangle of vines, hunting for any telltale signs of movement or distress. His anxious nephesh ached with dread as he beheld the ominous shadows among the withered weeds. He stood vigilant, every astral layer tensed with anticipation and fear, straining his ears to catch any sound that may offer clues to the whereabouts of his beloved pet.

"Something's wrong," he said. "Gimlet would've found the barbot by now."

"You think she's okay?" Cottontail asked.

"Don't worry. Gimlet can take care of herself. I'm more concerned about our current situation. We'll have to chop the barbot up here."

"You mean you."

"I'll get it started," he said. "But once I draw ichor, the ants will come. And since Gimlet's not around to defend us, I'll have to hold them off while you chop up the bird with the macuahuitl."

"There's too many ants!" she said. "You can't handle them all."

"Then you'll have to cut fast before they steal our food again."

"I don't want to. It's disgusting."

"You sound like someone who doesn't want to go to Paradise."

"You say that every time I don't want to do something."

"I wish I could be a dumb, snot-nosed little kid again," he said. "You ain't gotta do nothing but eat and sleep while somebody else takes care of you. If you make yourself useful, you won't be so useless!"

Cottontail kept her gaze trained on the ground, and a softly stifled sob escaped her.

Guilt churned in Cross's belly. Perhaps he had been too harsh on her. Though she was an ancient immortal being who had existed for epochs longer than him, she still had a human child's fragility and mental acuity. Yet if she were to survive any other encounter with the spirits in this Underworld full of darkness and danger, she needed to become hardened and learn from every experience, no matter how hurtful or severe. His curt attitude was a small taste of what awaited her if she could not stomach his words.

"Useless souls don't make it to paradise." His hushed voice trickled through the air, each syllable like a drop of honey, sweet, warm, and empathetic, promising healing for her battered ruach. The words embraced every hurt and pain as if they were his own, so she felt understood and

comforted, and all troubles were mere dreams. It was his way of embracing another soul and showing her that neither of them was alone. "I'm gonna see to it you make it."

Cottontail slowly drew her head back up, and then, with a sudden burst of energy, she flung herself into him, clinging to his waist with her bony arms.

"When you're done," he said. "Pick any piece you want. It's yours. Except for the breast. Save that for Gimlet. She has a bigger belly to fill. And she deserves it."

"I like the wings anyway," Cottontail said.

Cross unwound her arms from around him.

The lamentations of the spirits in the shadows grew louder, a frost-inducing and woeful hymn that settled into the atmosphere like a mist.

Cross cringed at their unbearable crying and sniveling. Their chorus of anguish swelled, pushing against his eardrums with a deafening force. If he could've reached them, he would've given them all a good slap.

"Oh, shut the hell up, you big cry babies!" he said.

His plea fell on deaf ears. Their cries echoed in the inky blackness as Cross crept through the mushy grass, his eyes fixed on the scrawny bald bird, careful not to startle it.

He cooed in a low lullaby, coaxing it with the tender melody of one of his favorite spiritual songs: "Ride up in the Chariot." The lyrics had always warmed his ruach and emboldened his nephesh, while at times, the song could soothe other spirits around him with assurance, compassion, and peace. Unfortunately, not the weepers.

Cross drew near the barbot.

The barbot's wings thrashed against its binds of bramble, its shrill cries echoing through the air. Its beak gaped open, and it wailed as it jostled its body. But despite its

frenzied attempts, none of its efforts proved successful, and it remained tethered to the weeds that held it captive.

Cross cautiously reached out and ran his fingers along the bird's soft, featherless brown astral surface.

A pang of guilt washed over him because he had to butcher such a beautiful creature, yet his taste buds danced in expectation of filling the emptiness in his stomach.

Cross launched himself onto the beast's leathery back. A series of piercing squawks ruptured the air, assaulting Cross's ears.

The barbot fought against him with all its might, twitching and flailing about as it beat its wings in a noisy frenzy, stirring up dust clouds. Poignant desperation filled its cries as it shook savagely, begging for release.

Cross wrapped around its sturdy neck, unwilling to let go. "Easy," he whispered to the barbot. "It's alright."

Cross's moved his hand along the warm surface of the barbot's head. His motions were unhurried yet relentless in their consistency, providing the beast with an aura of security and assurance.

The warmth radiating from his touch brought a peaceful reprieve to the barbot, allowing it to break free from its incessant uncertainty and constricting fear. His strokes were rhythmic and assuasive, kneading out the tension in its neck until it finally drooped its head.

Cross had always struggled to comprehend how he could form a spiritual bond with animals through physical contact; he had possessed this uncanny ability to connect with creatures since childhood. And it had saved his ass countless times. He could tame even the most vicious monsters in the deeper depths of the Underworld.

Gimlet, the ancestor of all monsters, was no exception. A long time ago, she fell under the president's reign and

cruel measures of subjugation until Cross stepped in and brought forth his mysterious power of domesticating monstrosities with a single caress. And if not for his vassalage under the president, he might be burning in the pits of Hell right now instead of roaming freely and scrounging for food.

Under his touch, the bird relaxed in his grasp, its stress dissolving into a trusting calm.

"Good," he said. "That a girl." Cross's calloused fingers grasped the underside of the bird's beak and drew it up.

The bird, though trusting, quaked with fear beneath Cross's touch. Each sinewy astral layer fought against Cross, its body tensed.

Cross held firm, entrapping it in a vice-like embrace. "I know," he said. "It's scary. But soon, you'll start to feel sleepy. Just close your eyes, relax, and everything will be all right."

Despite the darkness of the garden and the shadows within himself, Cross saw a tenderness in the creature's eyes that could not be extinguished.

"I hate it when you do this part," Cottontail said. Fear and trepidation gripped every inch of her face; her lips downturned, and her forehead creased.

"Don't turn away!" Cross's tone cut with icy authority, demanding obedience as he swept the macuahuitl through the air and angled toward Cottontail. His arm outstretched in a steady yet trembling gesture, his grip assured and unyielding upon its wooden grip.

The rectangular blades of his weapon refracted the fiery light, and sparkles of red danced off their obsidian sheen, glimmering like diamonds. Their ebony gloss entombed them both within an invisible arc of oppressive grandeur.

Cottontail's slight frame quivered as her chin dipped,

her dark brown tresses cascading down her delicate shoulders. Crimson-tinged exhaustion encircled her puffy gaze, which slanted downward in a sign of profound sorrow.

"I can't look," she said.

"You will," Cross said. "Whether you like it or not. Between here and Paradise is hell. Not the Hell… Well, that's somewhere along the way too. But I mean hell, as in nasty stuff. If you survive the journey to Paradise with me, you'll see worse things than this. Unthinkable things. What's out there ain't got nothing on the ants, the bats, the jaguars, or even the squals. And I'm doing my best to prepare you for it. If you can get through this, I'll know you can make it through everything else."

Cottontail's head lifted. She parted her lids, squinting in the darkness.

The obsidian blades glimmered as Cross positioned them at the bird's delicate throat. "May the Great Goddess have mercy on your soul." Cross's hand was steady as he brought the glistening obsidian blade to the bird's delicate throat. He gripped the weapon, feeling the intimate power of its presence in his hands. He severed the tender astral layer of the bird's jugular with one swift, practiced motion and faint resistance. His skill was such that no sound came from the single devastating cut through the meat, save for an eerily silent whisper that ended the incessant and woeful chorus of the shadowy ghosts.

A dense mass of impossibly dark fluid sprung from the gaping wound, absorbing all surrounding light.

The sulfur odor smothered the air and rose from the wilting grass where drops had spattered, a putrid aroma with undertones of cadaverous decay and smoky burning flesh.

Cottontail's face crumpled in discomfort, yet her

unflinching eyes never wavered. Her furrowed brows were two swords of steel, the flint of her spirit undiminished despite her inner struggle, reflecting her resolve despite her duress.

Cross swelled with pride, marveling at how extraordinary and courageous she was.

He understood her reluctance to witness such savagery. This was the only reason he didn't compel her to execute the bird herself this time, although he desired to put her through that ordeal as his mother had done with him.

The first time he ever slayed a chicken, he was even younger than Cottontail, and the fried eggs he had devoured that morning for breakfast left his insides revolting, and he soiled his only shirt. He had reared that chicken from the sweetest little fluff-ball to maturity. It was his original friend. There weren't any other Negroes near his age to play with, and that chicken was his sole companion on the plantation. When Mama forced him to murder it, he wept for a day and couldn't bring himself to eat it. He had come a long way since then.

Life goes on. And so does death.

Icy ichor coated Cross's hands and arms. With a solemn gesture, Cross raised his bloodied palm to his forehead and crossed himself to acknowledge his duty. He paid homage to the sacred triad: the mother, the maiden, and the crone.

Cottontail recoiled, her expression shifting to uneasy discomfort. Her lips pouted as if she wanted to spit out words of contempt. "Can you please stop praying to my family every time you kill?"

"I thought I was paying respect to the soul I just damaged," Cross said.

"You are," she said. "It just makes my chakra feel

strange. Maybe it's because I'm too close. Usually, prayers happen far away."

"Can you tell how far?"

"If I concentrate."

"Good," he said. "Since you like to wander off without following my directions, we'll likely get separated again for the thousandth time. Now, I can pester you until you return to me." A playful smirk rippled across his lips, its enigmatic warmth cascading over his face and emanating into the surrounding silence.

"You sound like my mother," Cottontail said.

Cross jabbed a finger into Cottontail's stomach, his touch as light as a feather.

Cottontail let out a tinkling laugh as she wriggled around with all the buoyancy of youth.

"Which one are you anyway?" Cross asked. "I think you're the maiden. I doubt you're the mother. And you're definitely not the crone."

"I don't know," Cottontail said. "We're not the ones who made up that custom. We don't think of ourselves in that way. But don't tell anyone I said that. Souls have strange reactions when you reveal the truth about their traditions."

Cross hoisted the lifeless barbot onto his shoulder, positioning its weight across his back. He carefully laid the broken barbot against a gnarled tree, setting it atop its head to rest upside down for all its ichor to drain.

"Draining the ichor is important," Cross said. "It prevents the creature from rising again."

"Rising again?" Cottontail asked.

"This is only its first death," he said. "It's now transitioning from Basar, its bodily form, to Ruach, its spiritual form. And ichor is the cohesive fluid that binds all three

parts of the ruach. Without it, the Conscience, Fellowship, and Intuition can not remain as one."

"And when the Ruach loses cohesion," Cottontail said, "the recently deceased can never become damned."

"But if you're already damned like me," Cross said. "You burn and blight."

"The second death," Cottontail said.

"So, we're doing barbots double favors," Cross said. "Just make sure you never eat ichor, okay? Under any circumstances. Unless you want to end up like the weepers, a squal, or some other miserable soul."

Cottontail's gaze was trusting, as if she knew he would always protect her. They shared a breathless moment of mutual understanding and connection that transcended words.

"I want to go home," Cottontail said.

"Soon." Cross settled into the soft dirt and patted his lap, inviting her to sit with him.

Cottontail nestled against him like he had done with his mother when life was simpler and more naïve. Mama's arms were the only security blanket that made the world feel remotely safe. And that was what Cross despised most about his memories. The good times. And Cottontail reminded him too painfully of his childhood friend Kate and the perplexing events surrounding the ultimate moments leading to his death.

He was the only soul in the Underworld who remembered their past life. So, it was no wonder why spirits hunted for his skull to gain a glimpse of life beyond their realm of existence. They coveted his knowledge so dearly that they would burn Cottontail to get to him.

And if they ever found out that Cottontail was the daughter of Magna Mater—the mighty Great Goddess

herself—her head would be worth more than a hundred of his own combined. The mere thought sent chills down Cross's spine.

He refused to cause another soul's pain and suffering, especially not Cottontail. Her presence gave him joy—her pure and untouched innocence—a treasure worth preserving, a rarity in the darkness he was all too familiar with. Like a priceless gem, her compassion should remain unknown to everyone. He longed to hold on to her earnestness forever. And he had decided early on that it was best to get her as far away from the sinister existence as he knew in this dark Underworld. But, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop it from tainting her, her precious tenderness hardening into something unrecognizable even to him. He wished with all his spirit that he could prolong her sincerity, but it proved impossible.

Cross cradled her head in his chest, feeling the divine warmth of their connection rush through his ruach. He ran his fingers through her hair, and his gaze followed his fingers, safeguarding her with an unspoken vow.

She would never reach home without his guidance, experience, and protection. So, despite himself, he trudged on with her by his side, determined to bring her to Paradise, no matter the cost. The intensity of his devotion to her was unfamiliar and unexpected, but it was undeniable. He had devoted himself wholly to watching over her and shielding her from danger.

Besides, her divine light remained his only key to opening the gates of Paradise and revealing its tempting waters. There, he would drink from the river Lethe, knowing its magic would forever wash away every memory he held, leaving only a blank slate.

"You never told me how long you've been in this place," Cottontail said.

"Long enough," he said.

During his three-hundredth year, he abandoned his attempts to count his sleep cycles—the only way those who dwelled within the depths of the Underworld could calculate the time they lingered in the afterlife. It seemed like an eternity had come and gone since then. He had endured the Underworld's endless day for countless years. Eternity was a restless bitch.

The barbot's spirit lay cold, ichor spilling across the forest floor. Every drop hung in the humid air before the foliage consumed it. An eerie silence fell as the leaves shuddered.

"Foragers!" Cross eased Cottontail off his lap and sprung up, a flurry of emotions whirling within him. "It's not the army yet, so we still have time."

Cross closed Cottontail's fingers around the age-worn wooden grip of the macuahuitl.

She ran her delicate fingers along its weathered edges.

"They don't want us, "Cross said. "They only want the food. But a little fear is good. It means you're paying attention. And when you're paying attention, it's difficult for something to surprise you." He smiled sadly as he saw the determination in her eyes, realizing this was an ending that neither had wanted but had been thrust upon them.

A beastly ant, the size of a rat, swarmed across the garden's decayed foliage toward the food.

Cross raised his foot and kicked it aside with all his might. It flew into the ashen shrubs which disintegrated into a small dust cloud.

Behind him, Cottontail dismembered the barbot methodically, hammering away at its carcass with a vicious

sort of fervor. The metallic clang of the barbot's parts echoed throughout the garden as she hacked it into pieces.

Cross writhed in hopeless torment as the searing hunger twisted and pierced his entrails like a thousand blades. Each vicious coil sent a fresh wave of stabbing agony lancing through him, threatening to rip him apart from within.

A primal groan emanated from his throat, his shaking muscles bereft of strength. With one final tortured gasp, he crumpled to his knees, defeated by unbearable pain, his eyes clamped shut against its unrelenting wrath.

He clawed at the muscles of his stomach as if he could rip them away and free himself from the voracious hunger, but the torment refused to dissipate, gaining strength with each sickening lurch inside him.

He had to fight through the affliction. Cottontail's survival depended on his survival. She was dismantling the barbot for his sake. She needed no such sustenance. And with every painstaking motion, she edged him closer toward a much-needed meal he could practically taste. His will to endure reignited. He shook off the shackles of his suffering, determined to end their struggle.

Cross staggered to his feet, his breath quick and shallow.

The dank garden undulated as the severed head of the barbot tumbled into the overgrown shrubbery. Something sinister lurked within.

Then, a hulking forager ant emerged from the spiny foliage. Its bifurcated mandibles clamped to the barbot's segmented tail and hauled its prize away.

Another of its kind skittered out of the thicket and sank its tenacious pincers into the barbot's breast.

"That's Gimlet's!" Cross yelled as he lunged forward,

snatching up his end of the breast and yanking back with all his might, locked in a titanic struggle against an adversary the size of his boot but as strong as several men.

He scrambled atop the breast, but his efforts were fruitless as the ant effortlessly bore him and the breast mightily with its vise-like mandibles. Its strength was formidable despite its diminutive size.

The muffled sobs of the weeping shadows grew louder, and a head sculpted from stone somersaulted towards Cross.

He caught the statue's cranium and slammed it down on the unsuspecting ant, obliterating it.

In response, the garden reverberated with an ear-splitting hiss that could only be produced by a swarm of ants charging forward with one goal: conquering their intruders.

Cottontail and Cross watched in horror as an endless sea of bristling bodies engulfed them.

Cross seized the barbot's breast, shouting to Cottontail, "Get the wings!"

Together, they hefted the bounty in their arms and raced through the dead kudzu in a fury.

"Get to the ball court," Cross said, remaining calm for Cottontail's sake. "The ants never go there."

The frenzied rustling of the ants' limbs drew closer.

Cross's calves bulged to bursting, but he dragged the breast behind Cottontail and then tumbled down the stony slope into the crusty ball court of Xibalbá.

It had been abandoned for eons, enduring the test of time in silence. It was as if the gods had decreed that this sacred arena should remain untouched, preserved in its ancient form until the end of time.

The weight of an eternity fell upon Cross's legs. Famish-

ment and thirst had depleted him, and any passing irritation could drive him insane. Collapsing under the shade of Bolon-Hunahpu's barren branches with Cottontail, they drank in the momentary peace with relish. The sentient tree, unconcerned about Cross and Cottontail's fate, appeared at ease in its slumber.

The legion of ants descended upon the periphery of the ancient ball court, stumbling into disarray and stalled at the precipice. A mysterious force repelled their presence like an invisible wall of energy, preventing them from continuing forward and entering the majestic bounds of this sacred space.

Cross, exhausted from the struggle, howled with laughter. He raised one of his weary hands to his messy hair and, in a fit of glee, mimicked the frenzied antennae of the ants with his wiggling digits.

"Too slow," he said.

"Don't tease them," Cottontail said. "They're just hungry. Maybe we should share some of our food with them."

"They weren't gonna share with us."

"That's what separates us from them. At least they wouldn't have teased us."

Cottontail's compassion was one of the many reasons Cross had been drawn to her. Still, if she were to stand any chance of surviving the treacherous voyage to Paradise with the unrelenting bounty hunters on their tail, then her kindness would have to be extinguished. However, Cross was reluctant to strip her of a trait so pure and rare in this forsaken Underworld. So he fed the ants what he could spare.

3 - BATHED IN MAGMA

A hushed murmur echoed around them, traveling on claps of lightning, illuminating the ball court and thundering across the land.

Cross couldn't comprehend the whispering words, but they were undoubtedly ancient and full of rage and malice. The voice could only belong to one being—the sovereign ruler of the Underworld himself: The Master.

The ants dispersed and marched back into the garden in a precise formation. Their movements were not those of a panic-stricken horde but of soldiers who had heard a commanding declaration and obeyed without question.

The devilish speech ripped through the sentient tree, shaking it from its deep slumber. Its branches sprang in surprise and shivered with terror, and if there had been any leaves left on its limbs, they would have disintegrated in fear.

The air charged with an unseen power—ancient heka coursing through the Underworld's veins. Orange-red fires in the sky scattered and wove together to form embers of black flame.

The court lurched and frothed, shaking the earth beneath Cross and Cottontail's feet. The ground split open, and all their hard-earned barbot meat tumbled into the abyss. Molten lava spewed from the depths and advanced in their direction.

Cross attempted to scoop Cottontail into his arms, but an oppressive but weightless force immobilized him as if invisible chains had ensnared his legs. His astral layers tightened. An unknown power clenched around his aetheric structure, freezing him in place. His ruach refused to obey his commands; ethereal energy overrode them. His

legs became stony pillars, immovable and unbending despite the tremors of the tumultuous ground. A weight pinned each foot into the soil like a sack of bricks. He struggled to move forward, yet this sorcery rendered him earthbound—akin to a petrified tree with its roots engrained in the land.

"I can't move," Cottontail said.

An apparition rose from the depths of a churning, fiery abyss. Burning chunks of lava flew off the spirit like water droplets, slowly revealing the woman underneath. Her figure was framed by rolling tendrils of smoke and ash. Molten embers crackled from her, casting a soft glow against the impenetrable veil of darkness that cloaked her form.

She had to be one of the Master's minions, a messenger, perhaps even the Master himself, come to drag Cross down into the pits of Hell he was so sure he deserved.

The fabric of her dark cloak billowed out around her, highlighting her voluptuous curves as she strode with grace and power. Her hair cascaded down her back in waves like a river.

She moved with purpose—each step deliberate and intimidating—as if she had mastered the forces of the Underworld itself.

The tail of her cloak trailed majestically behind her, amplifying the ethereal aura surrounding her. With confidence and poise, she approached them, radiating an air of power and strength that could not be denied.

As the enigmatic woman crept nearer, Cottontail clapped her hands over her temples, wailing in agony. Her cries reverberated through the air, piercing Cross's nephesh.

"What's wrong?" Cross asked her. He strained to move

or come close to her, but his feet were like lead as he remained immobile, preventing any solace he may have offered her.

"My chakra," she said, panting through the anguish etched on her face. "It's firing like never before."

"You told me that's how your chakra reacted when you met me."

"But I was specifically looking for you," Cottontail said. "I don't know that woman."

"But we are related," the woman said. "Distant relatives, for sure."

"No one in my family would ever work for the Master."

"Except for your big sister."

"That's different," Cottontail said. "She saved our mother's life."

"Thereby establishing the precedent that allows you and I to get properly acquainted. I could have come much sooner. But the Master chose this moment specifically. And I have so much to show you. Just come with me."

"Don't touch her!" Cross thrust his arm out, attempting to interpose between Cottontail and the woman. His effort was feeble, but it was all he could muster in that desperate moment.

"Put your arm down," the woman said.

Cross's arm dropped against his will, powerless against the woman's arcane artistry.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Cottontail said to the woman.

"You don't have a choice." The woman took Cottontail's tiny hand and glared at Cross.

The heat of her gaze burned straight through him, and his ruach quaked with dread.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll take real good care of her."

The woman guided Cottontail, gradually leading them toward the baleful chasm of molten rock that had opened up in the abandoned ball court.

A chill coursed through Cross's nephesh as he watched the billowing smoke and flames curl around them in a caressing embrace, beckoning them ever closer to the abyss. Scarlet-hued rivers of molten stone churned within its depths, an infernal omen that spoke of a dreadful future.

Cross fought against the woman's powerful enchantments, but he could not break free from the spectral grip encompassing his ruach. He remained hopelessly mired in the sea of her bewitchment, thrashing against the current of a remorseless tide.

"Who are you?" His voice strained as it echoed in the empty air, dull and distant like a pebble thrown into a bottomless well, echoing through the ruins of the abandoned ball court.

"Focus on your journey to Paradise," the woman said. "And don't ask me how I know about your intentions or why it matters to me because you won't find my answers satisfying."

"Try me," he said.

"It'll only lead to us talking in circles," she said. "And your time is limited. This realm will soon be overrun with squals, so I suggest you start moving."

"You obviously know more than you're willing to share," Cross said. "And if that's the case, you must also understand that Cottontail is my only way through the A'raf. Without her, I can't enter Paradise. So, you'll have to let her stay with me." Though he shouted with all his strength, his voice was swallowed by the shadows, devoured by the rolling thunder, its potency diminishing into oblivion, and its echoes faded into the ether.

"I see your predicament," the woman said, her tone sympathetic. "But you have a larger problem. The Master has taken an interest in you, which has attracted the attention of many powerful beings. Eventually, those who seek to harm you will uncover Cottontail's true identity—a naive and impressionable goddess who can be easily influenced and manipulated. While I know your intentions towards her are honorable, those who hunt you have sinister motives. They can and will enchant her to fit their desires. And unfortunately, you can't protect her from them. As long as she stays with you, she will never return home safely."

"And she will with you?"

The woman promised, "I'll do my best to keep her concealed for as long as possible. But it would be best if you found a way to reach Paradise soon. You can establish the strongest connection with Magna Mater there. Only she possesses the power to summon Cottontail back home."

"You seem so eager to aid us," Cross said. "Why not use your abilities to help us break through the seemingly unbreakable wall of Paradise?" His voice rose above the hiss and crackle of the raging inferno, a plaintive cry that cracked through the air like a whip.

The woman spoke calmly, "It's understandable that you may not appreciate my method of assistance. I acknowledge your reluctance to trust a stranger who suddenly appears and forcefully takes your dear little friend away. But simply asking for your cooperation in borrowing her would not have yielded the result we both need. And I know you well enough to know you won't let this go without a fight. Even if everything goes smoothly, there will always be a part of you wanting revenge."

"Maybe so," he said.

"Hence my method," she said. "Find solace in the fact that we share a common goal. And if you fail to gain entry into Paradise, then I'm just as fucked as you are. Is that enough to make an agreement?"

"You claim you know me well," Cross said. "What do you think?"

"You want some assurances."

"No, you do," he said. "Rest assured that if any harm comes to Cottontail, I will hunt you down and annihilate you."

The invisible force emanating from the woman's heka felt like a thousand tiny needles pricked at Cross's astral surface, urging his hand to rise and wrap around his neck. It was as if there were strings attached to his fingers, pulling them tight until they were wrapped tightly around his throat. The pressure was intense and unrelenting. Each finger curled inward, squeezing tighter and tighter until he could no longer breathe.

Despite his best efforts to resist, he couldn't have stopped himself from choking as the woman's heka held him in its grip. He had no control over his own ruach, a sense of helplessness and loss of control as his hand betrayed him. His desperate gasps for air went unanswered, drowned out by the relentless force of her power.

"If I wanted to harm poor little Cottontail," the woman said, "I could force you to rip her limb from limb. Then I could make you dive head first into the fires of the Inferno."

The invisible force enveloped Cross's legs, its grip firm and unyielding. It was like being caught in an overwhelming and terrifying current. His muscles strained against its hold, but it swept him along, marching him in a circular pattern around Cottontail and the woman.

But as suddenly as it started, the marching came to a

halt, and Cross found himself standing before the woman, completely under her control. His mind raced with thoughts of escape and resistance, but they were futile against the sheer strength of her heka. He was a mere pawn in her twisted game of magic and manipulation, stripped of his autonomy and awash in a suffocating wave of helplessness.

"But, alas, I need you both to survive," the woman said.

The unseen force encircling Cross's hand and fingers abruptly released him. The tension and pressure dissipated instantly, and the sensation of pins and needles vanished. His fingers relaxed their grip around his throat, and a sudden relief washed over him as he gasped for air. His arm dropped heavily to his side with a resounding thud, still under the hold of the woman's heka tightly tethered to him like a sturdy rope around his wrist.

Cross struggled to catch his breath before speaking. "You've gained the Master's favor. He gave you the rarest of all permissions, allowing you to perform heka in his domain."

"It's not a matter of favor," the woman said. "It's just leverage. Being privy to the Master's true name is the ideal way to earn such a license without becoming another vassal of his empire."

"What's his true name?" Cross asked.

"You wouldn't know what to do with such power. You'd likely squander it. Those who control their tongue protect their life. But those who speak rashly shall have destruction. The real question is, do we have an accord?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Your cooperation is certainly preferred."

"Then I'll need a way to contact you."

"Prayer works," the woman said.

"Not without your true name."

"Use Cottontail's," she said. "I'll eavesdrop on the tidings and reach out only when necessary to maintain secrecy. I'll allow her to confirm her well-being when it's safe. But you must act with haste. There are forces at work vastly more formidable than me. Despite my arrangements with the Master, or how you may perceive the might of my heka, my assistance is limited and can only extend your timeline for a short while."

"How much time can you give me?"

"Don't go on any detours," she said. "Head directly to Paradise, and all our problems will be solved."

"Just like that."

"It's not an easy objective. But it is simple."

"What exactly do you get out of helping us?"

"Anu will answer before long," she said. "Do whatever he tells you."

That phrase haunted Cross throughout his entire existence, echoing in his mind from the moment his mother uttered it before she was mercilessly killed. It resurfaced once more just before Cross's own murder. He couldn't comprehend the phrase's meaning then, and even now, centuries later, he struggled to grasp its significance. It left him with a sense of deja vu and a deep fear that history was repeating itself. Something was coming, something ominous and inevitable.

"What do you know about that?" Cross shouted after the woman. "Who is Anu?"

His plea bounced off the armor of the mysterious woman's indifference as she led Cottontail into the lava.

Cross's ruach burned fervently as he weighed every outcome, knowing full well what he desired but unable to decipher the right course of action. His feelings battled,

pushing him to go after Cottontail once he was set free, yet paralyzing him with dread in case his actions caused them both irreparable damage. The harder he tried to devise a solution, the more probable any attempt might cause their second death or annihilation.

The impossible choices tore him apart. He could only watch helplessly as the fissure in the ground swallowed Cottontail and the mysterious woman.

And it wasn't until the crevice had sealed shut behind them that the magical force that had frozen Cross in place released its grip, leaving him free to follow through on a decision that would impact his afterlife forever. With a broken spirit, he relinquished himself to his fate.

CHAPTER 2
STRANGE FRUIT

The enigmatic woman's icy, electric sorcery faded away into a placid warmth, liberating Cross's ruach from its unrelenting bondage. A lingering vibration in the atmosphere rippled like a gentle breeze, imparting a feeling of reprieve and freedom. The constriction in Cross's muscles was replaced by a buoyancy that allowed him to move spryly once again.

The Underworld was a relentless adversary, never affording respite or solace but reaping all that could be taken from a soul. And it could take away anything a soul possessed.

Cross was all too familiar with this nefarious practice and expected it, yet his fury burned undiminished. Despite its predictability, his powerlessness still left an inescapable truth—he was alone again.

Cross strode across the lifeless grass that blanketed the scorched, parched terrain of the ball court, his steps echoing in the fading black flames in the sky. He marched toward the looming tree at the court's heart; its arid limbs entwined and spun together like two hands clasped for

prayer, then unfurled into an impenetrable canopy overhead that protected its trunk from the crackling eruptions above.

"This is your fault!" Cross's voice reverberated off the two walls that confined either side of the ball court, an impenetrable chorus of many voices, boisterous and resounding, soaring into the air like a flock of arrows. His wrath echoed through the ether, an elemental growl that shook every skeletal branch of the ancient tree.

Its gnarled, creaking bark shuddered and moaned in response, like a spectral choir of unheard melodies echoing in concert with his own.

"Wake up!" Cross pummeled the tree trunk with a flurry of kicks.

The trunk buckled, and its hardened bark shattered. Cross's angry blows thundered across the barren landscape, shaking dust and dry leaves from nearby shrubs. His onslaught would have ripped the leaves off the branches if the weakened twigs had produced any.

The bark groaned and creaked as the ancient tree stirred from its slumber. Its mangled limbs split abruptly, and wood splintered, booming like thunderclaps throughout the ball court.

The sinister visage of a skull emerged from the knotty texture of the blackened bark and tangled branches.

"I'm searching!" Bolon-Hunahpu's voice thundered up from the lowest depths of the Underworld, a deep, ethereal, rumbling mixture of wind and gravel. It sliced through the environment like an ankou's scythe, filling the dead air with its ageless wisdom.

"I told you to wait for my signal," Cross said.

"It would not have changed the events." The skull's jawbones clunked like two stones rubbing, dissonant and

unnerving. The sound lingered in the air like the memories of a long-forgotten friend. “Verily, your utterances disrupt my concentration, scattering Cottontail’s reflections asunder.”

The skull sank back into the trunk with a bone-chilling grace as if returning to its rightful resting place. Its empty eye sockets melted away in the shroud of darkness held within, blending into the trunk’s crevices, leaving no trace that it had even been there.

Cross fell into silence, allowing Bolon-Hunahpu to trace Cottontail through the complex labyrinth of her underground root systems. He was reluctant to disrupt again, knowing this could be his only chance to locate her. His spirits lifted as he clung to his last hope that the tree could flush her out. As he held vigil, desperate for more news, his impatience spiraled into overpowering agitation, and the fire in his soul could no longer be contained.

“Anything?” he asked.

The bony branches swished together in a languid yet steady rhythm, creating a gentle hissing that carried an air of irritation with it. “Shhhh!” they said.

“Don’t shush me!” Cross held his breath, his palms dripping with sweat. With every passing second, anticipation clawed at the edges of his sanity while doubt clouded his mind; no news could be eerily interpreted positively or negatively.

The skull re-surfaced from the trunk; its empty sockets were now ablaze as intense white light beamed from within them. The skull’s jaw gaped as if it were about to reveal a haunted story or caution of some dark and ancient wisdom. Its penetrating stare was like a lantern of wisdom, calling Cross to use its power.

“Talk!” Cross said.

"Whispers from the ever-roiling chaos beneath," Bolon-Hunahpu said. "My sensing organ is aflame with the resonance of the Inferno's impending eruption. Be aware, for a great upheaval is upon you. It shall arrive in precisely one hundred and nineteen cycles of slumber."

"I don't care about your weather forecasts. What about Cottontail?"

"There lies the truth of my prophecy. Despite the great expanse of my roots, somehow, the woman has stolen Cottontail away from my gaze. It's as though they have ascended to a realm far beyond the Underworld."

"I thought all the gates were destroyed," Cross said.

"Rumors," Bolon-Hunahpu said. "It is said that the grandest deception the Master has ever enacted was to convince the inhabitants of the Underworld that there is no Master at all. But lo, everyone knows he lurks in the shadows. It would be the worst-kept secret if there were an attempt to conceal it. The Master's true aptitude lay in his deceitful ways, weaving tales of unmitigated truth with such falsehoods and diversions as to confuse those who seek what is real. With this clever ruse, the Master has obscured many truths, sowing chaos and mistrust among beings who ought to be allied in solidarity. He tricks spirits into battling one another for their subjective truth instead of seeking the objective truth—only to further enable the Master's schemes. As each group thinks its rival to be its archenemy, the Master cloisters secret knowledge right before our eyes, and none are the wiser. Even those privileged enough to serve beneath him remain unaware of the layers of truth hidden from them, as he does not entrust them with all of his secrets but only selected elements of reality. Thus, by cleverly concealing his actions, the Master has intentionally destroyed some

gates at his discretion while keeping others secreted away."

"You seem to know a lot about the Master's inner workings."

"I find myself with naught else to do but listen in on the musings and machinations of others, for knowledge is power."

"Then you must know where the remaining gates are located."

"I wish," Bolon-Hunahpu said. "Yet they lie beyond my grasp, for the Master is ever attuned to my incessant prying. I am not discreet in my investigations, and he sees my ambition to uncover his hellish secrets, and he knows the depths of my yearning to unveil his mysteries."

"I'm surprised he doesn't just burn you down."

"His deception is more artful. His machinations cut through my tendrils buried beneath the deep soil that once connected me to eternity. Few pathways lead to deliverance, and many lead to deceits and snares. Every gate may have a hundred traps crafted by the Master's heinous handiwork so that no being may trespass without careful consideration."

"We can narrow it down," Cross said. "Check each location one by one to find a gate."

"Know that even if one were to discover a doorway, remember that the Master holds all the keys. Nary a spirit may pass beyond this realm without the Master's consent. To receive such an absolution demands surrendering your soul and unwavering loyalty to the Master's inescapable will, thus forever trapping you in his perpetual grasp and this cursed realm."

"Unless there's a way to break out," Cross said.

"Unlikely," Bolon-Hunahpu said.

"Then point me in the direction the women took, Cottontail. I can pick up their trail myself."

"No."

"Why not?"

"The woman warned you to remain on your path, her words carrying the gravity of fate, an omen of what the Master foresees in you. If I guide your steps towards Cottontail, it would be a step in the Master's grand design."

"So?"

"I refuse to grant the Master's request. Abide not by his will, for it only brings suffering and servitude. Fear not; I know of a wiser course for you to locate and save Cottontail."

"Then quit your rambling and tell me!"

"Cottontail has revealed her true name to you. I know not the name, yet if you should speak it, I can perceive her precise whereabouts, for such is the potency of enchantment bound within a true name."

Bolon-Hunahpu's suggestion, though viable, threatened to expose Cottontail to further spiritual peril by uttering her true name. Even though Bolon-Hunahpu had been an ally in his journey, Cross still didn't trust the tree; he trusted no one. He had faced major betrayals at the hands of people he had once depended on, notably the person he had once trusted most in life; hence, he was unwilling to risk Cottontail in the same fashion. Even if he used her true name to rescue her, he refused to open her up to more harm or make himself vulnerable to new breaches of trust; her safety depended on him, and he would not divulge her name to anyone.

"And when I find her," Cross said, "then what? We're still in the Underworld and under the rule of the Master. We can't run or hide. He'll send his vassals. And you saw

how that woman froze us. I'm not some powerful deity. Even if I were, the Master once defeated the Great Goddess herself in battle. And you told me the Master turned you into a tree."

"I am no tree! I am a vessel of knowledge, a skull resting atop the ancient branches of life. Hear my words and remember them."

Cross lifted his palms, displaying a gesture that signified he could not distinguish between the skull and the tree. "Better you than me," he said. "My point still stands. I can't picture a scenario where I can prevail against the Master with no heka."

"You can obtain it," Bolon-Hunahpu said. "There is a vastness of blessed artifacts touched with divinity."

"I know," Cross said. "We stole Supay's divine chattel."

"Then it is done." Bolon-Hunahpu's voice bellowed like thunder. "The devil's scepter shall serve you well. Wield it with courage, my friend."

"The Master stole it from us," Cross said. "And weapons like that are rare. That was the first I've ever encountered in centuries. Only the Great Goddess can help Cottontail now. And Cottontail told me the only way to contact Magna Mater is from inside Paradise because it's more difficult for the Master to block prayers."

"Perchance, the Master has decreed this be your path?"

"Why would he want that?"

"As you said, he had bested Magna Mater before but did not vanquish her. My apprehension lingers that he desires to exploit your virtue and that of Cottontail as bait to draw forth the Great Goddess from her sanctuary."

"So be it," Cross said. "Let the gods fight among themselves and leave me the hell alone."

"Mortal," Bolon-Hunahpu said, his voice resonating

with the knowledge of centuries past, "the veil that separates us from Paradise cannot be easily lifted. The luminous gates stand fortified by divine power and are guarded by celestial forces beyond your understanding. Only those who carry the essence of divinity within them and conquer their inner darkness may pass through."

"I'll figure something out."

"I am aware of someone who may lend aid to this tragedy." The skull's bony maw clattered joyously as it spoke, its eye sockets radiating with their underworldly white-hot shimmer.

"Since when do you have friends other than me and Cottontail?"

"I've seen more than my fair share of wraiths pass through this dismal court, although there's been an alarming decrease in their numbers since the recent wars. I cannot call a single one of them an acquaintance, especially not her—though you might find an ally in her."

"Who the hell is she?" Cross asked.

"Have you heard of the Raven?" Bolon-Hunahpu said in a wise, gentle tone.

"Yeah," Cross said. "She's a bounty hunter whose reputation is almost as infamous as mine."

"And she collects divine chattel."

"She'd never share her stash with me. She'll trade my head for more objects and be on her way. If I was her, that's what I would do."

"If you desire entry into the realm of Paradise, you must establish a bond with her."

"And when her guard is down, I could rob her of all she's got. Not the worst plan."

"It is not my proposition. Your mind is ever quick to that of the least profitable avenue. There is no fault in the

application of discreetness and delicacy." A gnarled branch stretched down and patted Cross on the head.

Cross recoiled, flicking the limb aside with a jerk of his hand. "There are two kinds of souls in the underworld," he said," those that burn and those that don't. Souls who are too trusting always burn because the souls they trust turn on them like Judas."

The limbs of the tree swished from side to side. "What a sorrowful perspective," intoned Bolon-Hunahpu sagely. "There is no merit in forsaking connection because of fear. Everyone needs a friend. I shall assure you I have never broken my word and have no plans to do so."

"And that's why we're all here," Cross said. "Because the damned never foresee their damnation. If they did, they wouldn't be damned."

"The one reason we're damned is because the Master feeds off pain and suffering and draws his power from our torment. But know this; on the day of the resurrection of the dead, he will be made to pay for his sins. Justice and righteousness will defeat him, and all shall rejoice in its power!"

"That's just a bedtime story to help spirits cope with their afterlife. Even if it were some prophecy, the Master would never allow an exodus."

"It is thus that I must not permit you to do his will. We can unwittingly become a cog in his malicious machine to stop the forthcoming resurrection and downfall of the Master's dominion."

"I'll take the risk. I can't sit around here doing nothing like you."

"So be it," Bolon-Hunahpu said with a resigned sigh. "If you do not heed the words of an old one, then you require sustenance to keep your nephesh and ruach upright. The

moment of starvation begins a deathly transformation. And while I'd be content for you to haunt the palace grounds with me forevermore, your presence would always bring me grief, seeing what could've been had you kept Cottontail by our side."

"Do you truly want to help?"

"Verily, I assure you. You carry a seed of doubt, I sense."

"Your repeated failures are bordering on blatant sabotage. How do I know you're not working for the Master?"

"You utter such repugnant words as your eyes take in the trial meted by the Master himself upon this wasted form."

"Maybe your reward for helping The Master is that he'll reverse your curse and turn you back into… whoever the hell you used to be."

"Even if he should vow thus," Bolon-Hunahpu proclaimed, "never shall I trust the Master to keep his covenant. Especially not without a deceitful maneuver. I would rather be ensnared in a curse and linger forever encased in a bony prison upon the branches of this tree than betray myself by granting my allegiance to the Master of falsehood."

A verdant bottle-shaped fruit swelled out of the barren branch, its skin supple yet withstanding the desolation of its host branch. It glinted in the patchy firelight poking through the branches. It hung suspended before Cross, swaying enticingly and glimmering like an emerald gemstone, begging him to enjoy its sweet juices. But it would quench his thirst like a bullet to the gut would.

"Drink, young one," Bolon-Hunahpu intoned. "Let the sweet nectar of the calabash rid you of all this melancholy."

"Keep your poison," Cross said.

"Poison?" Bolon-Hunahpu rasped, his voice as dry as

the desert sand. The tree bark carved deep crevices between his hollow eyes, like an unspoken language etched onto ancient parchment. "I have not tainted the calabash with anything impure," he continued, "it is as pristine as the ethereal skies of Paradise—pure and unadulterated, for it contains the elixir of—"

"I spent some time in Vingólf," Cross said. "And souls would frequently end up in Prior Sinuhe's care half burned, warning about a talking tree that made them gravely ill. I'm not a healer, so I never saw what happened to them. But when Cottontail and I first arrived at this ball court, you offered us some of your fruit as a welcome gift. I didn't trust it, so I fed it a hodder to see what would happen. But nothing happened immediately. The results came days later. And your fruit didn't just burn that poor little creature. I found it with a gaping wound in its chest like something had clawed its way out of it."

"Gimlet ate him," Bolon-Hunahpu said.

"She never leaves leftovers," Cross said. "Especially not hodders. That's her favorite snack. If she didn't finish, it's because your damned fruit tainted the meat. You better not have made her sick."

"I would never!" Bolon-Hunahpu said. "Had you tasted the fruit, it would have alieved such doubts and offered you a blessing. For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit."

"You'll have to try harder than that," Cross said, "You sneaky little bastard."

"I am no sneak."

"You've admitted to spying on the Master of all people. And you're pretty vocal about what he did to you because of it."

"Not just me." Bolon-Hunahpu's vast branches stretched forth from his trunk like an ever-reaching wave of a thousand fingers, cresting across the ancient ball court and pointing towards one of the two walls lining the ball court. "Behold."

A myriad of petrified spirits lined the colossal stone walls; their purpose was unknown but undoubtedly signifying some ghastly game, long-forgotten. One of the deities immortalized in the image was rendered beheaded in a gruesome tableau. Crimson streams from his neck contorted into a haunting serpentine shape that spiraled around the boundary carved in the granite.

"That is Hun-Hunahpu," Bolon-Hunahpu said. "He was the very first of—"

"That's my point," Cross said. "You think the Master has similar designs on me."

"The woman confirmed such with her words."

"And you think I might unwittingly play into this secret plan."

"Cautiousness must always be your guide as it pertains to the Master."

"And that's why you seek to poison my nephesh, hoping to retaliate against the Master."

"Would not these fruits beckon you with their beauty?" Bolon-Hunahpu said. "Let this peel nurture your nephesh against the dark schemes of wickedness."

Howls reverberated through the great stone walls of the old ball court, twisting into every corner of the court until all afterlife had fled. The yowls and caterwauls did not come from the president's hellhounds this time. Instead, the incoming creatures brayed with the unmistakable laughter of…

"Squals," Cross whispered grimly beneath his breath.

He sprinted across the flame-baked court, his nephesh pounding in anticipation of what lay ahead. He flew up to the northern rim of the ball court, staring up at the Mictlān Mountains, majestically rising atop the distant horizon, bathing in flame.

His earshot had confirmed the worst of his fears—the squals had followed them from Ukhu Pacha to Xibalbá with greater relentlessness than before. Cross remembered how he and Cottontail had avoided Supay's wrath and escaped being devoured by the unforgiving legion of squals, leaving only three behind on the crumbling bridge outside the president's palace.

He was never foolish enough to believe they could outrun the squals, but he thought he and Cottontail would have long abandoned Xibalbá by now. But the squals were now closing in on him, still hungry for his head.

Cross sprinted back to the ball court's epicenter and confronted the grim visage of the grinning skull embedded in the ancient tree's trunk.

"How many and how far away?" Cross asked.

"I spy three," Bolon-Hunahpu said. "You have scarce moments to fill your ruach before the savage beasts intervene. You may choose to flee in the hope of sustenance, or I can provide nourishment to appease your hunger and assist you in combating the squals."

Bolon-Hunahpu swished its branches upward. Hateful eyes unfurled from the verdant boughs and glowered contemptuously. "It is in my bark and bone that I harbor an utter despise of those miserable creatures. In a moment of mercy, I once offered them a calabash of mine, yet they attempted to carve me out of the sturdy trunk! It is a marvel that I fended them off, though not without suffering terrible abuse. Henceforth, my counsel to you is this—

mayhap some calabash shall offer you aid and succor in the event of any confrontation. Come, speak unto me if it is the fruit of this blessed tree you seek, for you may have it." Bolon-Hunahpu's bony branches extended towards Cross.

"Choose wisely." The skull's ashen face split into a grin that promised salvation and damnation.

Cross stood motionless, contemplating his options as Bolon-Hunahpu's luminous eyes captivated him. Like a pair of stars that gaze deep into the abyss, they pierced into Cross's nephesh, leaving him transfixed and still.

The succulent fruit hung in the air, an oppressive force that compressed Cross's essence.

What was he to do? Chance a daring escape and endure a slow second death, or surrender his fate to the twigs of an underworldly enigma.

His stomach rumbled in bitter haste. And the guttural growls of the squals drew nearer. Time had run out.

Cross swung his arm and struck the calabash off the branch.

It flew and crashed against the stone wall with a violent splatter.

"The answer is always no, Skullface," he said.

"Pray, what is this title you continue to address me by?" Bolon-Hunahpu said. "Methinks I have clarified that such a moniker is not my appellation. Mayhap is a name best left behind in the dark annals of antiquity. I am Bolon-Hunahpu."

"Shut your squirrel hole, you big, dumb tree! You're gonna get me burned."

"I AM NO TREE—"

Cross clenched the bottom of the skull's jaw and wrenched it shut. Suddenly, his hand became damp with fluid. It was not sap. The liquid bore the watery consistency

of saliva—saliva from a dry husk covered in bark, tattooed with cryptic tribal markings and deep scratches as if it had been caught up in a vicious battle with an avian swarm. Yet nothing indicated this relic could somehow produce saliva.

Cross released his grip from the skull's jawbone and wiped his clammy hands onto his shirt.

"That hurt!" Bolon-Hunahpu said, adjusting its jawbone.

A branch crashed into Cross's head with a loud thud. A shockwave of pain pulsed through his skull.

He winced in agony and clutched his head with both hands, unable to suppress the pain as it throttled him.

Cross stretched his arm and plucked a branch from its cradle in the mighty tree. He snapped it in half over his bended knee with one swift movement.

An underworldly glow burst forth from the branches, illuminating the skeletal figure—eye sockets alight with surprise and anger.

Gnarled limbs of bark shot down and wound Cross by both arms. The bark was rough and splintered, its edges jagged, like it was composed of thousands of spindly fingers coiling around Cross's wrists, trapping him in its grasp. Its grip was firm yet gentle as if it were carefully lifting a delicate china doll rather than a human spirit. The bark was also slightly wet, as if sweating or exuding some sap-like liquid. Its strength was formidable, and its hold was unyielding as it hoisted him before the sinister skull, strong enough to lift him off the ground easily.

The skull's baleful gaze fell upon Cross, and a pointy branch jutted toward him, stopping mere inches from his throat like a spear of terror jutting out from an ancient warder.

"Beware not to bite the vine that nurtures you," Bolon-

Hunahpu cautioned with a voice as ancient as the stars. "Lest it strikes back in kind."

The giant thorn withdrew from Cross's neck, its prongs curling back on themselves and shrinking into the tree's bark.

The skull's ghastly eyes dimmed until only a faint glimmer of light remained. Gone was the shock and fury seen earlier, replaced with hollowed-out exhaustion and profound sorrow.

Bolon-Hunahpu's bluster had been no less hollow than all the occasions Cross had haughtily professed his intention to decimate the venerable tree and use its timber for kindling.

As Cross dangled from the branches, toes only inches from the harsh ball court beneath, his stomach grumbled and squirmed, a reminder of the eternal hunger that plagued the damned.

It was a detail that well-versed religious folk like his old friend, Mr. Beckwourth, had failed to mention in all their sermons about the afterlife. The pleasures of satisfying one's appetite were as elusive as everlasting peace, and under the Underworld's manipulative hand, a spirit never simply starved to second death. That would have been a luxury. The various stages of death were a tapestry of horror, each more unthinkably cruel than the last.

In his first week as a member of the damned, Cross witnessed the monstrous sight of a starved soul's bowels devouring its ruach. Since then, he had eaten religiously. No matter what predicament he found himself in, he fed ruach before it fed on his nephesh.

Now, more than ever, Cross needed Bolon-Hunahpu's help. The only solace for Cross was that Bolon-Hunahpu had promised him a way out, but at what cost?

"You believed you were Cottontail's protector," Bolon-Hunahpu intoned. "Yet all this while, she has protected you from yourself."

This truth was a mercy Cross wouldn't admit as if its admission would cast a spell upon him. It was the scent of a forbidden fruit that he dared not pluck. His pride bound him in chains, saddling him with an unfathomable burden of verity too treacherous to bear. The ruthless chill of shame rose like a fog and consumed his soul, forever engraving into his memory a lesson learned in vain. His stubbornness held him captive, strangling the words of acceptance until they were just faint echoes in his mind. Silence hung around him like a millstone on his neck, bowing him down with its heavy encumbrance.

Cross thrashed and squirmed, straining against Bolon-Hunahpu's relentless grip, his limbs trembling with effort as he vainly attempted to break free. "Let me go."

The gnarled branches relinquished their grasp of Cross and deposited him in the dusty ball court.

Bolon-Hunahpu swiveled his trunk and contorted his skeletal limbs. Eyes blossomed at the ends of each scrawny branch. The pupils darted back and forth, and the boughs swayed as if a gentle breeze caressed them, but no such comfort ever swept the Underworld. That would be too merciful for the damned. Frigid realms existed in the Underworld, yet they were as punishing as the blistering ones.

"Yonder lies Gimlet, on the far side of the penitentiary of animals," Bolon-Hunahpu said. "She is at play amongst the draggles. Would you like me to beckon her here?"

"Yeah." Cross clenched his fist as if gripping the word and determined not to let it go. "And get me a new barbot

before those squals show up. Fail me again, and I'll cut you down, friend. This time, I'm not bluffing."

Cross's words tangled in his throat, his jaw clenching like a vise. His voice was weighted, laden with fatigue and despair. Every syllable was precision-crafted and resolute, without mercy; every morsel was saturated with the distress of one who had succumbed to doom too many times and craved success. He had had enough of defeat. His ire filled the air, an invisible pressure smothering the discussion and atmosphere. The fog that shimmered in his eyes was the dust of his mind, the underbelly of a world where only shades of black and white persisted. The hangman lurked discreetly in the shadows of memory, but for Cross, the noose was not just a detached rope as it appeared; instead, it symbolized the clinking irons when he failed to succeed in life and death—shackles he had broken through time and time again.

CHAPTER 3
KING CROSS

Bolon-Hunahpu sent a barbot careening out of the inferno of the sky. At last, with a thunderous crash, the colossal avian landed in the middle of the ball court as they had planned all along. Bolon-Hunahpu's boney branches raised the giant, leathery bird aloft, allowing Cross to siphon every drop of its ebony ichor before dismantling its bulk into smaller, more manageable chunks.

It was a blessing that the barbots lacked feathers. To pluck such an enormous bird that could devour an entire horse would have taken far too long. To survive another sleep cycle in this wretched place, Cross had to eat hurriedly, locate Gimlet, and flee Xibalbá before the squals caught up to him.

He set his resolve: reach Paradise and summon the Great Goddess, the only one who could save Cottontail. Then, he would finally consume the River Lethe's waters to erase his memories before any depraved spirits could sever his head and steal them.

Through sheer strength of will, Cross determinedly took multiple sweltering trips as he hauled all the massive avian spiritual parts along the pathways and thoroughfares of Xibalbá, weaving between rows of dilapidated dwellings obscured by dead weed growth and flanked by silent sentinels of stone.

A deathly silence hung in the air as Cross passed the house of darkness. Chilling gusts of wind and tiny hailstones thundered and clattered within the walls of the shivering house. The tinkling of muddled chimes echoed within the blade house where he had discovered the macuahuitl; the knives that hung within clinked together.

He couldn't peep inside the jaguar house, for the doors were sealed tight, but no sounds of movement disturbed the eerie peace inside. Bolon-Hunahpu had warned him it harbored creatures of pure terror that needed to be caged for their own protection. Legend had it they were the only green jaguars left of their species in the Underworld, as were the giant bats locked within their aviary. The deities would someday return and reclaim them both.

Cross noticed a few of those gargantuan bats flapping around in the lifeless trees through the bars and fencing of the dome-shaped prison housing the nocturnal rodents. Of all the dwellings in this place, there were two he dared not enter—the bat aviary and the jaguar cage. Fear gripped him at even the thought of venturing inside. But he'd searched all other abodes for valuable objects but found nothing.

The Palace of the Lords towered over the kingdom of Xibalbá, its stone walls stretching over a mile and a half. Insidious weeds clung to it with an iron grip, pushing up against its mighty stones like bursting muscles in a shirt that was too small.

Beneath the eerie vines, there were carved depictions he hadn't noticed before, as if the vines themselves had uncoiled to reveal gruesome visages of skulls and decapitated heads just for him. One particularly exquisite carving depicted a serpent similar to the one adorning the ball court, only it featured faces inscribed into its form, rising alongside the stone staircase leading into a gaping maw of darkness that beckoned him inside the palace.

The air hung heavy and motionless as Cross strained, grunting with effort, as he wrestled the behemothic barbot up the steps, each lined by ever-watchful statutes that seemed to further wither away at their edges with his every step.

Muscles bulging with every step, he trudged through the majestic Palace of the Lords, dragging the last barbot fragments behind him. An oppressive sense of looming dread cloaked every corner of the edifice, almost as if each intricate detail had been placed there intentionally to add to its oppressive nature.

Cross arrived in the smoky cooking area of the decrepit palace, resolute in completing his morbid chore. With an ominous clang, he cast the barbot's beefy leg onto the hissing griddle he had preheated, filling the kitchen with the savory scent of burning astral layers.

A calabash rolled out of the barbot's gaping neck, thumping across the stone counter and onto the scalding surface of the sizzling pan.

Cross snatched it up before its venomous nectar could drip into the food.

A searing heat shot up his fingers.

He yanked his hand off the scalding surface of the frying pan.

The pan toppled off the heated stone surface and clattered against the hard floor.

Cross shook his stinging hand in pain, breathing heavily through gritted teeth. He blew on his fingers but failed to soothe the burning sensation.

Bolon-Hunahpu was a devious one—he'd tried to secrete the poisonous fruit within the barbot's carcass, banking on the notion that Cross would prepare the avian dish without bothering to inspect for any extraneous items stuffed within the bird. It nearly succeeded.

A divine flash of brilliance then struck Cross.

He set the calabash on a wooden tray without thinking of discarding it; though he had no intention of consuming it, he kept it in reserve as an insidious weapon against the Raven. If Cross could get her to imbibe from it, she'd burn, and he could steal all her divine chattel.

Cross sizzled the remaining chunks of barbot meat in the pan. The mouthwatering aroma almost masked the palace's old, musty smell that had lingered for centuries.

Despite everyone referring to spiritual flesh as meat, it differed from the living's skin, muscle, and tissue in many aspects. Ruachs—the formal term for spirits—were composed of an intricate weave of astral layers (spiritual "flesh") that encompassed their Conscience and ichor (spiritual "blood") that contained their Fellowship, all stitched around the 'bones' of an aetheric structure that housed their Intuition. At the core of the ruach resided the soul, referred to in formal terminology as the nephesh, where the faculties of Mind, Emotion, and Will were situated.

Fancy mumbo-jumbo aside, barbot meat eerily resembled the taste of chicken.

The irony was not lost on Cross—the only thing

remotely approximating nourishment in the Underworld bore a striking imitation of one of life's most beloved delicacies yet held drastically different implications for survival. In life, chicken brought joy and comfort, but in this cursed realm, its delicious flavors could only be savored as faint whispers on the tongue. It was a fleeting sensation, just barely grazing their taste buds and never fully satisfying.

Imagination and expertly blended spices were vital to Cross's enjoyment of such meals. The looming threat of metastasis, if he failed to eat, forced him never to let a single morsel go to waste, regardless of his level of satisfaction.

Cross carried the cooked meat and calabash on the wooden tray, and on his way into the dining hall, he tossed a fried barbot leg to the mysterious critters that lurked in the shadows and kept his pet Gimlet company when he was not around. Cottontail had given Cross the idea to feed the draggles. And he'd continue to do that out of his respect for her.

The enigmatic creatures clunked and scraped against the hard surface, their jaws munching away in the darkness, but their presence was much more tolerable than those incessant weepers out in the garden of One Death and Seven Death, so he didn't mind lending a kind favor to the draggles.

He didn't know how many draggles there were; he could only hope that the generous ration of barbot legs was enough for all. He had never encountered the draggles up close and in the light and preferred they remain out of sight and far away.

He was unafraid of these creatures, sensing an odd friendship between them as they'd behave like timid little

rodents more terrified of him than vice versa, who existed only in his peripherals. It was better to keep everyone and everything at a distance.

Even so, the draggles appeared friendly enough. Had they wished to devour him, they would have long ago launched their attack. He'd named them draggles because it signified their seeming unwavering loyalty, akin to devoted apostles tracing his steps from realm to realm. The thought was striking as he envisioned Cottontail's share of barbot wings as his last supper.

Unfortunately, the draggles presented a significant threat to his survival. They might have been why other spirits, such as squals, could always sniff out his hideouts despite his greatest efforts to evade capture. He never suspected the draggles were two-faced spies; however, their skill in staying hidden only extended so far, and anyone privy to their shadowed tailing could assume he was somewhere nearby. They served as unwitting guides, leading his pursuers right to him. And he lacked either the courage or skill to elude the draggles. The idea of abandoning them somehow felt cruel and unachievable; his ability to stay one step ahead without their aid was clearly limited. But even if he was aware of this risk—even if others knew too—it didn't change the fact that these supposed draggles had stood by him faithfully for countless years.

In the dimly lit dining hall, muted shafts of light lanced through the moth-eaten animal hide draped over the gaping windows in the turret. An indigo slab of titanic stone in the hall's center, weathered and aged from centuries of hardship, stretched like a pew in a morbid church.

Cross lingered over the jagged table, lost in the memo-

ries of how Cottontail had meticulously cleansed the grime and purged the webs of corrosion that had engulfed the pottery. She had also scoured away all traces of dust from the ancient ceramic bowls, remnants left behind by the deities who had once banqueted at this same table. Cottontail knew how to transform old, broken objects into something novel again.

They had donned themselves as King and Princess of Xibalbá's forsaken kingdom as an innocent game to amuse themselves—much to Cross's reluctance. This proclamation had been born out of Cottontail's juvenile fancy. Her ability to elicit childish behavior in him was unique, and he always found solace in those whimsical moments she created for them. He had even become reliant on Cottontail's affectionate manner to distract him from his ever-present darkness, yet such occasions were now a distant memory.

The candlestick Cottontail had plucked from the rubbish and shined to a brilliant luster glistened regally on the table.

Cross lifted it reverently, cradling the candle's wick within the fiercest rays of the scintillating sky until the wick ignited in a dazzling display.

He settled down at the head of the table and raised a chalice of devil's water to the hosts of unseeable dignitaries, whom he imagined ensconced around him.

"To Cottontail." His weary voice reverberated like a lone bell in an abandoned cathedral, each sorrowful note echoing off the walls and lingering in the air like a ghostly mantra. "May the Great Goddess have mercy on her soul."

His mournful melody, a blend of piety and gloom, wafted through the air like a phantom haunting an abandoned mansion: thick and hollow, its echoes evoking

painful memories that he had buried deep within himself. The oppressive sadness was stifling, drawing out despair.

He rested his elbows on the table, folded his fingers, and hoped his prayers could reach Cottontail as far as she had ventured. He vowed to her he would journey through unimaginable dangers and that he would overcome every insurmountable challenge to breach the Paradise gates so he could beseech the Great Goddess to return Cottontail from the Underworld's captivity and bring her back home in serenity.

The forlorn monarch then lifted the cursed chalice to his lips and drained the devil's water, solemnly swearing to himself that he would never again succumb to the enticement of companionship. His nephesh was heavy, and Cross cursed himself for ever considering it.

He tucked a tattered old rag into his shirtfront as a makeshift bib, and the draggles had finished gorging their bones and stilled themselves to rest. Only the raging lake of fire that was the sky crackled outside.

Arousal tingled in his tongue as he beheld the succulent barbot wing, its size larger than his head. He had sought this moment for what seemed an eternity, and now it had finally arrived.

With both hands, he raised the morsel to his lips.

The claws of the draggles scratched against the floor's surface with a high-pitched, metallic sound, as if shards of metal were being dragged across the floor. A frenzied scuttling followed, as if the draggles were trying to flee from something.

An icy shiver ran through Cross's ruach as a distinct dread emanated from the draggles, an aura of terror that usurped the hall.

Cross narrowed his stare and squinted hard into the oppressive darkness that shrouded the hallway before him.

Three sinister figures emerged from the abysmal corridor, their lupine forms appearing gradually as if summoned by an ancient spell. They slinked into the somber dining hall, sniffing and collecting information with every step.

No, not now! Cross's deathly hallowed stomach seized with dread and outrage. Couldn't they have just waited a few minutes until I had finished eating?

A frenzied pulsing thundered in Cross's ruach as the three squals slunk around the chamber, their adamantine claws imparting a discordant harmony of scraping rasps onto the flagstones.

Three deformed abominations with no eyes or noses, only maws filled with serrated teeth, and a lolling tongue dripping with slime. Their gelatinous bodies glistened in the faint, aureate light emanating from the windows.

Cross surveyed the daunting trio before him, quickly devising a plan to take out the biggest menace first and methodically eliminate the other two with calculated precision.

The larger of the three squals towered over the others with an ungodly monumental form, walking on two bent legs that seemed almost broken.

The second stood close to Cross's stature and build but was still very much transformed; his knees pointed backward distortedly.

The last was minuscule compared to its brethren, slithering on four limbs and having a forked tail that twitched with razor-sharp stingers.

The creatures scoured every corner and crevice, searching for him.

Had it not been for the telltale screeches of the draggles

scurrying away, providing an early warning of the squals' approach, Cross would have been caught unaware of the imminent danger. But if those same draggles were his friends, why had they abandoned him in this moment of great peril? Now he was left to question whether his devoted apostles had betrayed him or if their retreat had been a strategic move to give him time to escape. Either way, he was alone, and finding salvation was up to him.

Cross held his breath, still as a statue, hoping against hope that they wouldn't notice him before he could figure out his next move. These lightless lurkers could cleave his head from his ruach with one swipe of their razor-sharp talons before his insatiable hunger could burn him to second death.

Cottontail had wielded Supay's divine lightning rod with absolute precision, annihilating the throng of squals that sought to take his head at the president's palace. The ones confronting him now wouldn't let him escape their grip again. And his only weapon, now, was an obsidian blade.

He lowered his gaze to the table, a sense of dread settling in as he realized too late that his macuahuitl lay carelessly on the kitchen counter. He fought to stifle his inner turmoil as his thoughts raced back to how he arrived here—to this place, at this time—and his nephesh groaned in agony for the path not taken.

He leaned forward to extinguish the candle and give himself the cover of darkness, and his stomach rumbled.

In a unified instant, the trio of squals shifted their eyeless gazes toward him.

The largest squal spoke, his voice a low rumble. "Your mind is a treasure, my friend, worth far more than nine objects-sss."

Every squal spoke in a sinuous tongue—a sibilant hiss like a rattlesnake warning its foe, drawing out their words with an ethereal slither like a serpent winding its way through tall grass.

"Do you mind?" Cross swept his hand downward with a flourish, showing the neatly arranged rows of barbot wings and legs he had laid on the table before him. "I know how important I am to you, but—"

"Your head," the man-sized squal said with a forked tongue. "Or rather, what lies-sss within your mind is-sss of greater import than you yours-sss-self."

"Fair enough." Cross shrugged. "The thing is, you interrupted my meal. And if I don't eat, I'll burn. My head is no good to you if I burn."

The trio of squals exchanged disbelieving looks at his careless demeanor, debating how to respond.

Good thing they needed his head to remain intact if they were to pilfer his memories. It was the only thing that had kept him from being devoured like Supay had been. Despite their current efforts to take him captive, he was resolute in making it an unforgettable ordeal for them to obtain his memories.

"A single mors-sss-el will sss-suffice," the hulking squal rasped, his voice reverberating off the walls of the cavernous chamber.

"Cheers." Cross hoisted the gargantuan barbot wing to his quivering lips, but he hesitated, struck with inspiration. "Wait. Where are my manners? You three came all this way. You must be starving. Sit down. Dinner's on me." He nudged the rotund calabash down the length of the wooden table, bridging the gap between himself and the squals.

He never expected he would need to use this portion of the fruit as a weapon against the squals, but it might just be his only option to overpower the monsters. He had intended to save this portion of calabash for poisoning the Raven, but fate had other plans, and he could always get more of these venomous fruits from Bolon-Hunahpu if he survived.

"Fresh fruit!" The man-sized squal lunged for the calabash, only to be met with a fierce clapping of jaws from the burly squal beside him.

He recoiled away from the fruit.

The calabash plummeted from the table, resting in a distant corner of the room.

The burly squal made no move to hunt down the prize, clearly comprehending Cross's sinister intentions to poison them.

The beefy squal said, "Eat quickly! Or we'll feed your pet cornurus-sss to you bit by bit on our way to Mictlān."

The hulking squal and diminutive squal jeered, baring their jagged fangs in a malicious leer. But the manish squal stared at the calabash in the corner with an unearthly fixation.

Cross's evil plan appeared to have yielded results on one of the creatures; now, he had to concoct a way to surmount the other two.

Cross sank his teeth into the barbot wing's tender flesh, unleashing an explosion of juicy chicken flavor that filled his soul with joy. He had masterfully married the seasonings and spices together in a way that even he, in his wildest dreams, could not have imagined. If only Cottontail had been there to enjoy it with him.

As he savored each tender bite, he used these fleeting moments to contemplate his next plan of action—how to

best fight his way out and free himself from his relentless pursuers.

The squals barred his only avenue of escape. If he could lure them away from the main corridor, then he may have had some hope of making a getaway. But they would indeed outpace him. And should he dare venture into the tight quarters of the kitchen, they would be quick to ensnare him. Yet that was where he'd left his macuahuitl; if he could recover it, he would be far better equipped to confront them.

He sat, hardening his resolve as he lazily chewed the sliver of barbot wing. As the meat settled in his gut, his muscles relaxed. Barely sated, he licked his fingers before daintily wiping his greasy hands and mouth on the bib tucked in his shirt.

"Enough." The large squal soared into the air, crashing onto the far end of the table with a thunderous crash.

Ancient pottery overturned and shattered against the floors like glass tombs.

The remaining two squals held their ground, barricading the main entrance to the chamber.

The musclebound beast advanced across the table towards Cross. Its clawed foot sank deep into the barbot's breast and hurled it aside in one swoop.

The other squals lurched sideways, narrowly avoiding its trajectory.

Cross seized the barbot wing from the tabletop and lurched backward, pushing his throne away with a screech of chair legs reverberating off the walls. He brandished the wing like a club, swinging it in a wide arc.

The brawny squal leaned back, evading its path.

Cross lunged forward again, unfettered by his previous failure, but this time faking a swing.

The squal dodged away from the faux swing.

As it sprang back, Cross used its momentum to strike it hard in the head with the massive wing.

The giant wing broke apart with a loud crack that echoed through the chamber like a gunshot.

The squal twisted in the air amid a sputtering of saliva flying in every direction and splinters of bone scattering all around, and the squal thudded to the ground.

The medium-sized squal loomed like an impassable fortress, obstructing Cross's retreat as the diminutive squal zigzagged around the table, assailing him.

Fear surged through his ruach, and every fiber of his being tensed in anticipation of what would come. He had no intention of letting them regroup; keeping them separate would make it easier for him to fight them off individually.

The small squal fluttered with haste, its corpulence undulating in a sleek and sinuous motion, gliding around the table with an almost disturbing gracefulness. Its scales glistened as the dim candlelight danced along its edges.

Cross's mind raced. His arm shot out like a catapult, clasping the ancient chalice in a vice-like grip before heaving it towards the squal.

A cascade of its contents spilled into the air and soaked the creature's head and shoulders.

Adrenaline coursing through him, Cross snatched the blazing candlestick from atop the table and thrust onto the drenched squal.

The candle's fire licked the devil's water, igniting a raging inferno that engulfed the squal's head with a deafening roar.

A hideous shriek of agony burst from the squal's fanged maw. "It burn-sss us-sss!" Its mask of skin melted and

morphed into a stringy texture that dripped off its chin until nothing remained but two desolate pits of shadow where once eyes had been.

Cross reached down, plucking one of the splintered fragments of bone from the floor. Its length was equal to a dagger's, and with its frigid edge, it felt almost alive in his hand, though its girth had been reduced in the merciless heat of destruction. Grasping it was an act of destiny.

He leaped atop the table and sprinted along its length toward the final squal.

A claw wrapped around his ankle, stealing his balance. He crashed to the table, knocking over centerpieces and decorations with a clatter.

The squal at the door outstretched its claws. Its limbs quivered as it tensed its body. "Do not damage the head!" The squal's voice was sharp with the familiar hissing quality as if they were being dragged over hot charcoal.

"The head already has-sss a hole in it." The shadows of dusk deepened as the hulking squal's harsh, rasping tones echoed off all four walls with a sinister vitality. With its talons embedded in Cross's leg, the squal bared its rancorous maw, the razor-sharp incisors gleaming like daggers in the faint light.

Cross stabbed forward with his bone dagger, aiming for the scaly neck of the hulking squal.

The behemoth's arm shot out and caught Cross's wrist before he could make contact.

Cross kicked and connected with the squal's jaw. It cracked like thunder beneath his boot.

The leviathan stumbled back and vainly tried to regain footing but failed.

Cross rolled over to the other side of the table, staggering on his bruised leg as he went.

The final squal stared at him with its eyeless, all-seeing gaze, peering through him and into his nephesh. It would pounce if Cross so much as made one wrong move such as threatening to stab it with the bone dagger.

He searched the corner until he alighted upon the calabash tucked away in the dark. Moving warily, he made his way toward the venomous object. He calmly plucked the lethal fruit from its resting place with shaking hands and chucked it to his pursuer without warning.

The creature's talons snatched it from the air, and its hideous maw drew open. Its stare transfixed on the poison-laden fruit with an eeriness that filled the room. It then bit through its skin with dizzying speed.

Cross had been so engrossed in his survival that he had temporarily forgotten that the toxin wouldn't immediately incapacitate his adversary. It would take an unknown amount of time. And the other two squals had not burned. The large one lay still, concussed from the impact of the kick to its head, while the frail one writhed in an anguished howl caused by the searing pain from his scorched face.

Cross had to take advantage of the creatures' preoccupations and make his escape while there was still time.

He streaked through the grand hall, careening around serpentine passageways before shooting down the posterior of the palace towards where Bolon-Hunahpu had last detected Gimlet.

The razor-sharp talons of a squal scraped down the dingy floor in his wake as he thundered past several palatial chambers, his desperation renewed with every step.

The dismal orange radiance from the flaming sky outside leaked between the small gaps of the hanging animal pelts that adorned the windows flanking the colossal entrance doors.

He had no time to open them and thus needed a faster escape. He aimed for a glassless window, hurling himself through the void and grasping the animal hide on his way through. He swung through the air, and his shoulder crashed into the cold stone wall.

The hide ripped in his grasp, its fibers tearing with an almost musical sound.

Gravity dragged him to the unforgiving earth and the bone dagger tumbled from his grasp. His nephesh raced as he snatched it from the dust-ridden earth and bounded upright, searching the oppressive gloom for the foolishly untethered Gimlet. But she was nowhere to be seen.

"Gimlet!" His desperate voice boomed through the palace grounds, rippling off the cold, ancient stonework and piercing the vast expanse of desolation.

A hint of wind stirred in response, swirling his call around the empty grounds and carrying the whisper of his plea into the distant horizon, never to be heard again.

He chided himself for not having tethered Gimlet and instead granting her the freedom to wander as she pleased. This was the consequence of his naïve kindness—a lesson he would never forget.

Cross then recalled Bolon-Hunahpu's promise to lure Gimlet to the ball court. Maybe she had already arrived.

A squal careened through the window he had just hurdled, its girth barely allowing it to fit through the narrow breach. Its hulking ruach landed before him with a loud thud, blocking off his only escape route to the ball court.

It had to be the big one. Why not the small one?

Its bottom jaw dangled low from where Cross had shattered the barbot wing across its face.

The creature strode forward.

Cross sprinted down the lane of statues and dashed around the palace like lightning.

The monstrous, slack-jawed squal trailed behind him.

The tiny, melted-faced squal blocked his way ahead. It must've maneuvered through the palace to cut him off.

The two squals crept closer, one from his front and one behind him, boxing him in.

Cross spun on his heel, rapidly turning sideways so that they were now both at his sides, where he could keep both within his line of sight.

"Fellas," he said. "I'm not worth all this effort!" he said as beads of sweat trickled down his face.

But the squals he had wounded were no longer content with banter; their white-hot rage left no further room for discussion.

Cross spied the blade house several dwellings away. It housed a bounty of macuahuitls, among other blades. All he required was to infiltrate and acquire one. But he had to outrun the much swifter squals to get there.

However, the dome-shaped aviary of bats neighbored the palace. If he could somehow evade the squals within the aviary first, perhaps he could then make his way to the blade house.

Heaving heavy breaths, Cross barreled through the alley of stone-carved bats up to the aviary gates.

The squals followed in hot pursuit.

Cross's sweaty fist grasped the ancient iron door's handle, its rusted edges grating against his astral surface. He forced it open with a heave and slammed it shut behind him.

But the squals hammered their forms against its massiveness before he could secure its latch.

The door cracked open, leaving a slim gap.

Through it, the squals' razor-sharp claws reached for Cross and tore into the fabric of his shirt sleeve.

It would be his end if he failed to secure the iron door. No begging, pleading, or penitence would spare his head. They would finally carry out their unholy rite and mercilessly siphon his memories from his nephesh, leaving him helpless and defenseless. Then they would sit his nescient skull on grim display atop a spike, condemned to an irreversible, eternal state of oblivion.

CHAPTER 4
DIE FLEDERMAUS

Cross heaved against the sheer mass of the imposing iron aviary door, his muscles straining to slide the latch in place as it groaned under its weight.

An angry chorus of screeching and raging echoed around him as he fought the force of the frenzied squals attempting to burst through the doorway.

Cross plunged the bone dagger into their hands, wrists, and forearms.

Black ichor oozed from the punctures, splattering Cross's face and hands and staining his shirt.

The screams abated as they wrenched their arms away from the aperture of the door.

And with a desperate shove, Cross pushed the door shut and latched it in place, securing the entrance with finality.

Taking a shaky breath, he stepped back, knowing that these creatures would never give up on their vengeful pursuit, but at least he had bought himself some time.

A precarious wooden bridge jutted from the mouth of

the aviary, snaking through an expanse of petrified boughs and a thicket of ravaged vines, shrouding the enormous cage in darkness.

The wispy jungle hung above Cross's head, frayed and worn. Its warped branches were gnarled and fragile, like a petrified arboreal graveyard, their finger-like twigs clawing for the edges of the aviary's dome-shaped fencing before succumbing and dropping away in defeated stillness. Remnants of leaves lingered on, auburn, wilting, and contorting, seeming to be suspended within eternity amongst long tendrils of pallid vines.

Cross peered over the edge—bloated gray boulders and strange frothing pools of various colors dotted the landscape here and there. With his nephesh beating in his chest, he beheld a ramshackle shelter at the far end of the bridge, deep within the aviary's bowels.

He had never ventured into this domain before or glimpsed that haunting cabin. Hope fluttered tentatively within him as he suspected there must be an exit on the other side. Most houses on Xibalbá featured multiple entrances.

The iron door crashed behind Cross, shaking the rickety wooden bridge beneath his feet. The thick metal of the door could not contain the piercing screeches and snarls of the squals on the other side as they threw their bodies against it with unbridled zeal. Slaps and scratches rang out along with the struggling clicks of hinges and the handle being violently yanked, yet all to no avail.

An eerie, shrill chorus descended from the seething branches above as the leaves rustled and whipped against each other in a flurry of wild and chaotic movement. The desiccated canopy shook like a swarm of locusts, with haggard brown and gray branches thrashing in the air.

Withered leaves trembled with an ominous crackle like a terrible beast rampaging through the forest. The air filled with crunching sounds as fragile stems and withered husks snapped and shattered with each tremor. Twigs and dried-out foliage rained down, signaling a nightmarish terror yet to come.

A thousand shrieks and flapping noises shattered the air like a tornado. Trees shook to their very roots. The aviary's cage rattled. The reverberations jolted Cross to his core as he felt the piercing eyes of unseen predators who did not seek his memories but only the essence of his nephesh.

He took a deep breath and stepped forward through the entrance of the prison-like aviary. His nephesh raced with anticipation but also a heavy sense of trepidation—he had taken a colossal gamble in going there, and there was no guarantee that it would pay off. A daunting unknown lay behind those old wrought-iron gates, and there were far too many potential pitfalls to be aware of. The squals were the devils he knew, and he had traded their familiarity for uncharted territory. Thoughts of doubt and apprehension crowded his head as he backed away from the entryway—his fate now inextricably linked to the secrets of this strange place. There was no turning back now.

Abruptly, a chorus of high-pitched squeaks and fluttering wings descended from the shadows, heralding the emergence of giant hissing bats pouring out of their roosts in an overwhelming, dark cloud.

The giant bats filled the aviary with chaotic patterns as their silhouettes darted between shadows and firelight like nightmarish gargoyles. They created an eerie whistle amidst the darkness, screeching and calling out to one another. Their leathery wings beat against petrified boughs

and thickets of ravaged vines with a thwack, punctuated only by the harder thuds of the squals who were still beating their bodies against the iron door now far behind Cross.

An inky pall blanketed Cross as he high-tailed it across the ramshackle bridge. Its timeworn planks protested, almost breaking under his weight, emitting an agonized creak and a defiant groan with each step as if they feared what would come.

The bats fluttered and soared around him like a flock of spectral wraiths, some half his size, their fangs snapping and their razor-sharp talons snatching for a hold. He weaved between them as they lurched at him from all directions, racing towards the cover of the dilapidated shack in the center of the aviary.

Halfway across the bridge, a bat flew ahead, perching itself on the wooden planks before him. The bat hissed and brandished its fangs.

Cross punched the creature.

The bat tumbled into the shadows of the forest beneath him and disappeared into the depths of a nearby pond with a single splash.

Gratefully, only a single menacing bat had launched its bold attack against Cross. Should a swarm target him, it would be an overwhelming calamity. Courageously trying to stay composed amidst a haze of dread that swelled from within his very soul, Cross could not help but consider the benefit of having the squals break through the iron door—so that any potential onslaught of bat attacks were aimed away from him and toward them.

A loud boom erupted at the bridge's far end as the squals tore through the rusty iron door, shattering its hinges.

A teeming swarm of bats flapped out of the doorway, escaping their prison. A flurry joined the fray in a frenzied attack on the squals, providing Cross much-needed relief.

Did the Great Goddess answer his prayers? Perhaps not.

Bat talons clawed down his forearm, digging deep into his wrist.

Another bat flew into his back. Its claws punctured the cloth of his shirt and pierced through his astral layers.

The force knocked him forward, and he tumbled into the depths of the abandoned shack with a raucous of splintering planks.

The floorboards creaked and groaned as he rolled across them, splinters of wood catching on his astral surface and clothing as he moved.

He twisted and convulsed but could not rid himself of the beast's relentless grip. He screamed out in agony as the minute razors dug deep.

"Away from him!" The squal descended from the darkness with blistering speed, its powerful claws tearing through the bat.

A piercing pain erupted throughout Cross's back; he was sure that a shred of his astral layers had torn off, clinging to the paws of the bat.

As he gasped for air, his insides seething with indignity, two squals jousted against the gargantuan bat, one on each side of the flying rodent, grappling for supremacy.

The lower jaw of one of the squals hung limp, clinging to its mangled face, flapping with dismal frailty because of Cross's boot, which shattered it in the act of desperate brutality.

The massive bat clenched its paws onto the fleshy chin, viciously yanking it off the squal's face in a burst of darkened ichor.

The squal collapsed on itself and thrashed, its broken neck spewing black ichor all around, before succumbing to its wounds with a piteous hiss.

But Slackjaw refused to burn to second death. Thus, it still posed an imminent risk. And Cross had lost his bone dagger when the bat tackled him moments ago.

Cross sprang to his feet and scanned the murky depths of the shack, his nephesh racing as he searched for a means of escape. His gaze halted upon a door across the room, just beyond the grasp of the tiny squal and its sparring match with the bat.

Cross had singed that squal's flesh beyond recognition through a sinful concoction of devilish elixir and diabolical candle flame.

Its lanky limbs repeatedly slammed the bat against the hard floor until the wretched animal stopped twitching and screeching.

Melty-Face proved a far more formidable opponent than Slackjaw, likely compensating for its relative lack of physicality. Exceptional combat skills complemented its wiry build. Slackjaw's reliance on sheer size and lack of finesse had become its downfall. Cross realized his costly miscalculation in prioritizing the largest squal first, as the smaller creature was every bit as persistent and demonstrated greater ferocity.

Now that the bat had been subdued, Melty-Face carelessly stepped over the still form of his mate, Slackjaw, lying on the ground and extended a bloody hand in what seemed an almost tender gesture towards Cross.

"Have they caus-sss-ed you harm?" The squal said with a menacing rasp.

Cross tore across the decrepit old floorboards, splinters

piercing his boots as he fled from the vicious squal on his trail.

He blasted out the exit and slammed shut the soft, rotting wood. He pushed himself against it, trying to hold it together as long as possible.

The bridge connected the backside of the shack to the other side of the aviary, revealing a hidden passage.

Oddly enough, the squal had yet to attempt to tear down the withering wooden barrier as they did with the iron door at the front entrance.

Cross peered through a tiny slit in the door.

Slackjaw still lay motionless on the ground, ichor spilling from the gaping hole in its neck. Melty-Face was nowhere to be seen inside the shack.

The squal must have circled around the premises, planning to ambush him in the depths of the aviary. There were still two squals left standing, and one remained unscathed and vibrant until the venomous effusions of the calabash seeped into his nephesh.

Cross's nephesh pounded against his chest as he imagined one of those ruthless creatures waiting for him beyond either side of the aviary. He had no choice but to take a daring and unpredictable chance.

He stared at the top of the aviary, knowing that he could scale it, but his feet were heavy with dread. Everything in Xibalbá was ancient and crumbling. He could slip through and escape unnoticed if he found a weak spot in the fence. But as he examined it closer, he noticed how sturdy it appeared, like it had withstood centuries of wear and tear. If he used too much force, it could alert the squals, but if he didn't use enough, he wouldn't be able to get out. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, he was unsure what his next move should be. There was no simple escape.

He swung onto the bridge railing and lunged fearlessly over to a decaying tree, straining under his weight. He ascended the deciduous sentry until he oversaw the entire aviary below.

Stillness filled the air; not a single squal was in sight, and only a few bats remained cowering from the commotion that had sent their brethren into flight.

Melty-Face slunk into the aviary through the back entrance as Cross had expected. As it stopped at the bridge's junction with the shack, its head swung from side to side like a pendulum, inspecting every inch of its surroundings. Slackjaw emerged from the other end of the shed, equally vigilant.

Cross clasped at the wired fencing overhead, bullying it to discover a point of vulnerability.

Every inch was tightly entwined with verdant vines, lending it impressive stability. Despite Cross's efforts, it wouldn't budge.

The branch he had been perched upon cracked beneath him, and he tumbled downward. His chest slammed into one of the lower limbs, and he gripped it, saving himself from plummeting further.

"Come down from there!" Melty-Face implored, his fingers unfurling into desperate claws of plea. "You will damage that beautiful mind." The squal scampered up the tree.

If Cross had a pistol, he might have been able to use it to threaten to put a bullet through his skull if they advanced any further. And if the scoundrels were willing to believe him, he could shoot them instead. But alas, here he was, with no means of protection.

He hefted himself atop the branch, finding balance in the swaying foliage.

The squal's snarls ricocheted through the dead air as it ascended ever closer toward him.

A vine swung across his face with a sharp slap, dangling from the roof of the aviary, where he had been tinkering with its fencing.

Though it was unclear if his meddling had loosened it or if this was some kind of divine intervention, Cross took fate into his own hands.

Clutching onto the vine, he tested its strength and found it might be capable of supporting him.

Cross bowed in reverence of the Great Goddess and kissed the vine as a token of gratitude. He coiled it around his arm and launched himself away from Melty-Face's vicious claws, soaring up into the air like a barbot.

The wind whistled past his ears above the skywalk before he glided back towards Melty-Face, straining its tiny arms outwards as if trying to protect Cross from any harm.

Cross kicked his legs high out of range of Melty-Face's flailing talons and swung over the squal with millimeters to spare, then soared across the shack's roof.

He couldn't just swing back and forth forever. But high above the ground, he had few options left—his arms trembled as he reached heights that would have been far too dangerous to jump down from, even if he'd wanted to. He was just a naked pendulum with nowhere to land safely, and his clock was ticking. His momentum was ebbing away. The only viable option was to ascend further and try again to break free of the fencing that barred the top of the roof. His fate now hinged on his agility and bravado.

He carefully scaled the wiry tendril, but as soon as he had put his weight on it, it jolted with a sudden ferocity that suggested it would snap.

The mesh wiring of the roof that fastened the vine quavered.

If he yanked forcefully enough, he might break the stubborn meshing and create an opening in the domed ceiling to escape out of—or plummet to the forest floor if he yanked too hard.

Fatefully, the slack in the vine had already lowered him to a height where Melty-Face's talons could snatch him.

Melty-Face loomed atop its perch, waiting patiently for Cross to swing into its embrace.

Cross tucked his knees into his chest and kicked off from Melty-Face's viscous spirit.

Its claws raked against his legs, tearing through his trousers and leaving deep gashes.

Cross soared over the bridge.

Melty-Face leaped onto his vine. The weight of their combined masses tugged on the delicate vine, stretching it to its limits.

The metal roofing groaned, protesting under the pressure. Their fate lay beyond the grip of that tenuous thread.

The fibers unraveled one after another, straining to keep them suspended in midair. The ceiling gave way with a thunderous crash, and the vine snapped.

They both plummeted.

Branches shattered beneath Cross, cushioning the extent of his fall and sparing him from further injury, save for a bruised rib.

Cross crashed into the bridge on his shoulder with a loud thud and an eruption of wood splinters and metallic shards careening around them from its violent descent.

Dazed from the fall, Melty-Face staggered to rise next to Cross.

Cross unleashed a swift kick to the squal's head.

The creature crumbled onto its back and came to rest near where Cross had dropped his bone dagger earlier.

Despite his pain and fatigue, Cross crawled towards the weapon, snatching it from the ground with quivering hands. He summoned strength from within himself and plunged the bone dagger deep into the flailing creature's chest.

The wretched spirit emitted a plaintive wail as it withered, like the howl of a banshee—loud and piercing in its sorrowful intensity. The sour smell of sulfur and smoke drifted through the air, stinging Cross's nostrils with each labored breath.

The creature writhed about, its limbs curling and contorting into the rigid postmortem rigor mortis position set in the very pose it had burned. With a faint crackle, its brittle, charred husk clumped into a black, ash-like state of second death. Fissures formed in its hardened shell with a loud snap, like shattering glass. An ooze of molten ichor trickled through the cracks like tears down a bereaved face, accompanied by a faint, crackling noise reminiscent of frying bacon. Splattering and popping noises filled the air—the liquid sizzling and seething like molten rock as it hit the wooden bridge with puffs of steam. It carried a sickly sweet aroma similar to burned sugar and scorched copper mixed with a cloying odor akin to a rotting corpse burning in the sun for days near blooming flowers in a cemetery. The fumes lingered long after, reminiscent of the stench of an opened crypt.

Cross shuddered at this disturbing portrait of death. This macabre display wasn't uncommon, but it still gave Cross shivers of disgust.

Cross's old friend Sinuhe was the first to impart to him that there were various stages of death.

Second death involved the obliteration of all three parts of a ruach—the severing of Conscience, Fellowship, and Intuition from their deity caused the spirit to burn to second death, becoming a blight on the Underworld.

Cross had just delivered this fatal blow to the squal; it had now become a blighted spirit, its ruach reduced to an empty husk. It subsisted, and yet it expired simultaneously. Neither one nor the other wholly. Conscious in the nephesh but departed from any intelligent afterlife and vulnerable to the perversion of third death, it would be subjected to complete corruption of its Mind, Emotion, and Will, allowing its energy to be siphoned for evil purposes for eternity. That was precisely what their clan intended for Cross—to behead him and pilfer his memories.

After suffering third death, souls could face further stages of death based on whatever malignant intent was being inflicted upon them.

Cross was acutely aware that he had stepped into the actions of a man forsaken as he released the bone dagger and crossed himself in solemn reverence of the Great Goddess—The Mother, the Maiden, and the Crone.

His silent prayer and sign of the cross were instinctual, born from the many years he had trained as a soldier of his faith under Prior Sinuhe. But too late did he realize that Cottontail, lost somewhere in the depths of the Underworld, may have been able to feel his plea, and, even worse, she could sense his wrongdoings through her intrinsic connection with her goddess powers.

The weight of his sins crushed him, but it wasn't the first time he had burned a spirit, and it would not be the last. If he were to endure the trek on his quest to Paradise and aid Magna Mater in rescuing her daughter Cottontail,

then countless souls would surely meet their fate at his hands.

Cross shook his hands, flinging the squal's ebony ichor onto its cold remains. He wiped the remaining inky substgance off his hands and onto his shirt with a slow, deliberate motion, letting its crimson stain stretch outward like an ominous warning. He could still feel the creature's warmth on his ruach, but it was gradually replaced by the familiar coldness he now embraced.

Burning squals may not have been as simple as stamping out an insect, but as with squashing a bug, the second death of an individual squal meant nothing in the grand scheme. They bred like cockroaches, and no matter how many were eradicated from the Underworld's seemingly endless swarm of them, more would unceasingly plague Cross for eternity if he maintained custody of their precious commodity—his memories.

This truth dawned on Cross as he had been inexplicably left alone in the aviary. Slackjaw had vanished. He wished the squal had succumbed to his wounds and burned up into ashes. But if that weren't the case, Cross once again found himself in the same predicament, with two vigorous squals poised at either end of the aviary's entrances, ready to attack.

Cross leaped to his feet, a quick sprint from the front door, where he expected the third squal to lurk unless the poison calabash had already felled it; in this case, he would have one less adversary to contend with. Not willing to gamble, he spun towards the back exit instead. He'd rather chance upon Slackjaw—a severely injured squal that could barely stand to fight.

Cross burst through the rear iron door and found

himself faced with a sinewy figure matching his height and build in every regard except vitality.

It was not Slackjaw but the squal that had devoured the calabash in the palace dining hall.

Cross's neck constricted as a wave of abject despair washed over him. "Son of a bitch!" He thrust his head back with the urgency of his ire, and the surrounding atmosphere swelled with indignation and distress.

The squal looked healthier than when he had last come across it. Its slumped posture now held a fierce, defiant stance. The curvature of its spine had straightened, its knees pointed forward instead of backward, and its skin had wizened as if the wickedness itself had been drained from it. Perhaps a sign that the poisonous effects were already taking their toll on the creature's ruach and nephesh.

The squal's fish-toothed grin gnarled, its razor-sharp incisors regarding him contemptuously from its perch at the threshold of freedom.

What had once seemed so close was now slipping into its perverse grasp. An all-encompassing sensation of defeat enveloped Cross's very being. His shoulders sagged under the burden of potential surrender as he exhaled his fatigue.

He was woefully unequipped to take on the mighty squal in its prime. Starved with exhaustion, his muscles were sore from countless battles and tumbles. He had weathered every strike and slash smoldered from the beasts' talons, and though his options were limited to a pitifully inadequate bone dagger compared to the beast he confronted, he refused to yield. His only option was to stand and fight or end up like the squal he had burned.

His teeth gnashed against each other, and the

surrounding sweat dripped down the contours of his face as he clenched his jaw in vexation.

Cross raced through the darkness of the lane, sprinting towards the sinister Shivering House, planning to surprise the unsuspecting squal with an icy slipperiness that lay in wait beyond the precipice. It would be a gamble, but he had no other choice if he was to emerge victorious.

He threw open the door and realized he had been misguided. A green jaguar reclining languidly inside raised its head, its emerald eyes blazing with malice as it bellowed a menacing growl.

"Shit!" Cross flung the door shut and whirled around to make his escape.

Only then did he notice the pathway of statuesque jaguars leading up to the house. He had been careless—a mistake he would have to avoid repeating.

Cross barely had enough time to react as the squal thundered up the alley towards him. He dove out of its path just in time to avoid being tackled.

The squal crashed through the door and into the habitat.

Snarling and yowling erupted from inside the house.

Cross crab-walked backward, desperate to escape, when the squal expelled from the house like a cannonball.

It flipped end over end before skidding to a halt near Cross's feet. Its sides heaved with heavy breaths, and it bared its teeth at the approaching hoard of jaguars.

Cross arose from his crouch, stepping away from the jaguar enclosure, accompanied by the squal. With every inch of retreat, his nephesh thumped harder, almost matching the pulse of the burning sky.

"Look what you've done," the squal said, creeping backward at his side.

"Me?" Cross said.

"Had you only come with us-sss, you could have contributed your memories-sss to the community of the damned. You would have ass-sss-is-sss-ted all the fors-sss-aken in a bid for liberty from their calamitous-sss after-lives-sss. We may have had a chanc-sss-e at es-sss-caping this-sss wretched exis-sss-tenc-sss-e together. You'd have been hailed as-sss a hero—The Man Who Remembers-sss would be commemorated as-sss the sss-savior of us-sss all. But now we both will be cons-sss-umed."

"You should hold them off while I escape," Cross said.

"Why would I do that?" the squal asked.

"As long as I survive, someone from your stupid community can still get my memories. And when they do, I'll tell everyone all about your sacrifice. Before they lop off my head, that is. We'll both be heroes."

The squal rose to its full height, its eyeless skull held high in regal pride, basking in the glow of the fiery skies. "I sss-shall be remembered."

"I'll never forget you." Cross shoved the squal forward.

The squal launched it into the gaping jaws of the slavering jaguars.

A guttural chorus of snarls bellowed out of the beasts' throats, punctuated by sickening crunching as they clamped down on the squal's vulnerable spirit.

"Yes!" Cross cried out with a manic ecstasy, spurring the jaguars on with an unhinged and savage glee that burst forth from him like a murder of crows. "Eat him! Chew 'em up!" He cackled, his voice quivering up and down, shrill with exhilaration, as if the jaguars were acting on his bidding. He was just desperate for success, just as much as they needed to fill their stomachs.

Cross should have run away, but he watched with

morbid fascination as the jaguars tore into the squal, rending its flesh with claws and teeth.

Surprisingly, the squal held its own against the jaguars. His cunning and intuitiveness provided a formidable adversary for the feral felines. The ferocity of the fight shook the charged, balmy air with a commotion of gnashing and rending flesh. It was unclear who was winning within the chaotic storm until the squal launched two jaguars into the air, hurling them out of the dust brawl.

The jaguars plummeted to the ground in a chaotic cascade of fur and soil, their powerful bodies limp and motionless.

The remaining members of the jaguar pride skittered off into the unknown, their howls of doom echoing in Cross's ears as he surveyed the carnage before him.

Three expired jaguars lay burned to second death, the quivering victor standing proudly amongst the remains of his foes.

Cross's nephesh swelled as a flood of anxiety coursed through him. "Shit!"

The squal's jagged teeth winked in the firelight while its long tail whipped behind it. "It is-sss better to sss-savor the sss-spoils-sss of my heroics-sss than not."

Cross scanned the desolate terrain before he pelted towards the blade house. His determination was absolute this time—he had found the correct building.

He pushed open the door, and a gust of air whooshed into the house and stirred up the thousands of blades that hung from clotheslines strewn across the walls and ceiling. The wooden paddles and axes clanged, and the obsidian blades swooshed and tinkled.

Cross reached for a flat wooden paddle with rectangular obsidian blades around its edges, similar to the

macuahuitl he left in the kitchen. It refused to budge. A clothesline threaded through its handle tethered it to the wall.

He yanked hard at the blade. The rope grew taut and caused another blade to swing down at him.

He leaped back. It almost grazed him as it swung towards the entrance.

The squal stepped inside, dodging just in time, narrowly avoiding being impaled by the razor-sharp pendulum.

Cross closed his fingers around his new macuahuitl's cold, rough handle in relentless fury. With one sharp tug, he tore it away from the clothesline.

The old rope looping through the handle broke in a cloud of dust, transferring the weapon of war into the hands of a warrior, slivers of string still clinging to the loophole on its handle.

He swiped the obsidian blade at the squal, letting out a fierce battle cry.

The cunning creature ducked and snatched Cross's shin between its hand-like foot, heaving with all its strength.

Cross launched backward onto the hard ground below, shredding his back; the talons of the giant bat had left painful gashes in its wake.

The macuahuitl clattered just beyond, a tantalizing reach away.

The squal's hand-like foot encircled Cross's neck with a frigid grip, the scales, and talons digging deep into his astral layers, pushing against him with an unrelenting pressure that threatened to crush him beneath its might. He was utterly immobilized and could not fathom a single movement, no matter how hard he tried.

He strained out with hope, and his fingertip brushed against the macuahuitl's handle.

The squal stooped, leaned over Cross, and began inspecting his skull, propelling Cross's head from side to side with each observation. The creature's scrutiny crept into Cross's thoughts, casting an ominous pall as it loomed above him.

"Perhaps-sss, you were right," the squal said.

"About what?" Cross asked, a flurry of thoughts loitering in his mind.

"Maybe you are not worth the effort. None can be sss-certain if we ab-sss-solutely require all energy bodies-sss of your ruach. It is-sss a mere precau-sss-tion. Unfortunately, the Underworld is-sss chaotic, and tragedies-sss are commonplace."

The scaly talons of the squal dug into Cross's neck, brutal and relentless like a vise.

Cross sputtered for air, straining to break free from the squal's unforgiving grip. He pounded his fists against its legs in desperate fury, scarcely making a dent in its thickness. He thrashed and writhed, yet his writhing was futile; he couldn't escape the squal's grasp.

His lungs screamed for the toxic Underworld air as his gaze shifted to the enormous blade suspended from the ceiling.

Its rope cascaded downward, secured with a horn-shaped metal anchor embedded firmly in the flooring.

If he could sever the link, the sharpened steel scythe would come crashing down onto the squal's head with devastating force. The knot wasn't within arm's reach, but he could free it with one swift cut of his macuahuitl.

His fingers brushed against its cold hardwood handle, which lay beyond his reach. If only he could distract the

squal long enough to grasp it. With every second, his desperation increased. Fate had given him only this one chance…

"It's…" Cross's voice was strained and ragged, scarcely recognizable as he exhaled the word "true" between gasps, his faint whisper becoming increasingly labored.

"What's-sss true?" The squal's sharp claws retracted from Cross's ruach. It scraped against Cross's neck as it slacked its hold, leaving a stinging sensation in its wake.

Cross drew in a long, ragged breath of relief, the oppressive Underworld fumes filling his lungs with an acrid caress. His throat still ached from where the squal had squeezed him, rasping and raw like it had been sandpapered down to the flesh. Even though he was surrounded by the putrid stench of sulfur, decay, and flame that permeated the Underworld, Cross couldn't help but feel grateful for the respite from his burning lungs and sore throat.

"Sss-speak!" the squal hissed.

"You need me in one piece," Cross said uncertainly. He'd weave any falsehood to suit what the squal needed to believe. "But you don't have to take my word for it. Take me captive instead. I ain't runnin' no more. I promise. There's no need for you to anger your clan. Let them reward you for not burning me. You deserve to be remembered after all this effort. The one who brings results should get all the credit, especially when he did it all himself."

"I am female," the squal snarled, her rancid breath billowing from its frothing jaws. Hot saliva drizzled in silky threads from the corners of her fanged maw.

Cross had not perceived the squal's femininity. Nor could he distinguish what set female squals apart from their male counterparts; however, he didn't feel even the slightest inclination to care.

"Forgive me." Cross shuffled his fingers in the general direction of the macuahuitl, his practiced eyes sizing up the contours of the female squal with a subtle nod of approval. "Honest mistake. You all look alike. I mean. I have terrible vision. Too much head trauma. I must say, though, that despite my poor eyesight, your beauty is unmistakable. You're the most striking squal I've ever seen."

The squal's pincers clasped around Cross's throat, cutting off his air supply. Her eyeless gaze fell upon the macuahuitl now in Cross's clutches.

Cross hacked the anchor's rope with all his remaining strength. It snapped and recoiled like a whip.

The large scythe descended from above like a vengeful goddess and put to rest its fury upon them both.

They evaded the blade by mere inches, and it staked itself into the floor between them.

It would have skewered them together like some grotesque kabob.

Another blade stabbed into the floor, just inches away from Cross's ear. Hatchets followed suit, swinging back and forth from the ceiling as if dancing to an unheard melody.

Cross tumbled across the floor, finding purchase on the wall as blades whirled in all directions, whistling around him. He kept his back flat against the masonry as he inched along, slicing more ropes.

Bladed contraptions rained from above in a blizzard of knives, daggers, and swords.

Once, he would have marveled at the oddity of this house and questioned why someone would design something so obviously impractical. Yet, as centuries had passed while wandering the Underworld, he had beheld sights far more bizarre and malevolent, crafted with even less reason. Still, what purpose did the construct serve?

Neither the squal nor Cross paid any heed to one another now. All that mattered was survival as they both leaped and ducked for their afterlives.

A titanic battle axe descended with a thunderous crash, and its edge sheared through the squal's flesh and bone like a hot knife through butter, cleaving the squal's arm off cleanly at the shoulder.

Thick streams of ebony ichor jetted in a geyser from the gruesome wound as her dismembered appendage crashed to the ground with a resounding thud. She bellowed in anguish before slumping to the ground in agony.

Cross denied himself the perverse indulgence of watching Miss Lefty burn. He had been so foolish to linger in such a grim spectacle too many times already.

He narrowly escaped a barrage of blades; miraculously, the Great Goddess ensured his safety, and he tumbled out of the dwelling unscathed.

But he had barely stepped out of the door when a horrific figure appeared in his path. Slackjaw, with its exposed throat and missing lower jaw.

Cross shrank in horror as it heaved in agony, belching black ichor from its gaping wound and staining the ground beneath it.

Cross sighed, his exhaustion palpable and tinged with an ominous thrill of terror. "Are you kidding me?" he said. "Why won't you burn already?"

A voluminous emerald projectile flew past Cross's head, colliding with the wall and detonating in a putrid display. Shards of shattered calabash were strewn about the blade houses' entrance while its viscous contents smeared across the borders, leaving behind a disquieting fragrance.

Cross squinted up the hill and beheld the decrepit talking tree in the ball court.

The skull of Bolon-Hunahpu emitted a burst of cackling laughter that echoed across the palace grounds, its maniacal jaws clacking together with each momentous syllable. Its withered branches creaked as they twisted backward, like an angry serpent about to strike, until they snapped forward.

Slackjaw launched himself at Cross, but before the creature could reach him, a veritable barrage of calabash gourds descended upon the squal's back like waves against an ocean cliff.

Cross stepped aside casually, and Slackjaw careened face-first into the dirt, its screams echoing off the walls and ricocheting into oblivion until it lay motionless, defeated.

Bolon-Hunahpu swayed his branches gently in a languid farewell embrace before an irrevocable parting.

These might be Cross's last moments with the mystical talking tree. He wasn't sure if he felt sorrow or relief at this prospect; an unknown answer dwelled deep inside his nephesh.

"Go bring Cottontail home!" Bolon-Hunahpu said with a roar that shook the entire palace grounds, his voice emanating from everywhere and nowhere like an old god's reign had been restored. His words were thunderous drums filled with majesty and anguish, like a king whose throne had been stolen yet still commanded armies to reclaim it. The air vibrated with his demand, its force entering Cross's aetheric structure and filling his three energy bodies with resolve. It lingered until the gloom embraced it with a finality that promised untold secrets and legacies. The last syllable remained in the atmosphere as if Magna Mater herself had declared it, leaving Cross with a sense of purpose and hope.

Cross raised his hand in farewell to Bolon-Hunahpu.

Slackjaw shuddered, and its hulking form lurched to its feet with a graceless effort. The squal stumbled forward, the firelight glinting off its scales.

His nephesh heavy and burning with rage, Cross swept his macuahuitl forward and severed the monstrous head from its ruach.

"Don't lose your head," Cross said.

The jawless head rolled down the hill, and the squal's ruach burned to second death.

Cross crossed himself—The Mother, the Maiden, and the Crone—and finally spotted his pet, one of the few remaining cornurus believed by some to be the ancestors of all monstrosities.

Gimlet loomed more enormous than a horse, her broad shoulders and muscular build belying the strength she possessed.

She cantered toward Cross with a power that was both serene and imposing.

The booming beat of her mighty cloven hooves resounded and reverberated through the ground, announcing her presence with titanic force.

Her wild tail whipped around in a fury, its lethal spikes glinting like daggers of retribution in the firelight. Her strides were playful, yet her gallop was an urgent, graceful expression of strength as if she had been forged from the inexorable will of some unstoppable force. She could effortlessly pulverize a spirit without a moment of consideration. She was a formidable sight, an avatar of impressive might that terrorized all who beheld her.

Cross's fingertips were gentle yet firm as they explored the contours of her silvery gray hide, decorated with horns of different sizes and shapes. Each jutted out from her body in an intimidating spiky pattern that

glinted in the firelight, imbuing her with an almost regal presence.

His calloused fingertips grazed the mordant protrusions, perceiving the keen edges of each one filled with the latent vigor hidden within her muscular neck and shoulders, a glimpse into the immense potential of might beneath her ebullient vivacity.

"Where the hell have you been?" Cross said to her. "I've been running around here. I could've used your help."

Unlike a certain tree, his cornurus never spoke. But this did not deter Cross from engaging in contemplative conversations with her. He found solace because she could not respond, no matter what he said. He could pour his heart out to Gimlet; she could never use that against him to deceive or manipulate him. He derived comfort from the loyalty of animals; they were always direct and honest with him, leaving no room for confusion or doubt. Gimlet offered him unwavering companionship as a refuge from the Underworld, where he often felt so out of place.

Gimlet gave a low, reverberating grunt and swiveled her massive, gray body so she could lock eyes with Cross. Her stare was deep and penetrating, subdued yet powerful—a gaze not even the most foolhardy spirit would mistake for cordiality. Her head was almost too large for her neck to bear, and her mouth curled across her face in an ever-present devious crescent moon, an expression most foolish spirits mistook for friendliness. She had only exhibited a pleasant disposition toward those she had grown to trust, such as Cross and Cottontail.

Miss Lefty, the one-armed female squal, limped out of the blade house, her mangled limb releasing a trail of ink-black ichor across the shriveled soil.

Gimlet tensed, honing every astral layer like a viper

ready to strike. Her maw opened slightly, her fangs glinting in the dull firelight as she bared them against the intruder. A sharp exhale and a menacing snarl rippled in her throat, each syllable coating the air with a chill of fear. Her heavy tail lashed back and forth, slicing even deeper furrows in the already desolate terrain as she readied herself for battle.

Miss Lefty shuddered, crumpling to the ground in a heap beside the headless, burned ruach of Slackjaw.

Cross swung onto Gimlet's back, the cornurus giving a mournful grunt. He tapped his heel on her side.

Gravel sprayed up around them as they rode off into the horizon.

CHAPTER 5
MAKING SPIRITS BLIGHT

1 - VIŅSAULE

Diamond Tooth navigated her mangy hellhound up the menacing walls of the Viņsaule mesa, an oblong-shaped butte rising out of the parched wasteland like a malformed mushroom.

The hard-to-reach summit stood as a black beacon in the fiery sky with cliffs, challenging even the most committed, like Diamond Tooth. The first glimpse of its towering crag was enough to make most spirits quaver. Forged by the Master's hand, the jagged edges formed from millions of years of ichor and chaos, almost impenetrable. Venturing up the mesa's heights required a devilish determination.

The kind of person who lived on the mesa meant to keep away all but the most tenacious spirits or perhaps wanted to remain hidden from the Underworld for eternity. It was a dwelling place from which one would have to be unhinged to depart regularly because of its outrageous impracticality.

This assured Diamond Tooth that she would come

across her quarry on the mountaintop of the mesa. She had been summoned to do a job and would see it through as always. The main thing that kept her pushing upward was an insatiable epicaricacy and morose delectation. Indulging in those exquisite delights was always the part that she relished most.

And Diamond Tooth's hellhound was relentless in its ascent, never ceasing until it eventually reached the apex. The dog's claws clanged like thunder, and each stride quaked the canyon walls. Patches of fur sheered off as it shuddered in its ascent up the cliffs.

Diamond Tooth nearly tumbled off its back, not having saddled the hound and not affording her the leverage of reins to hold.

The hellhound could fit a saddle, but Diamond Tooth preferred riding him bareback. Adorning him with equipment would be too slow for her line of work, and accouterments constrained her from developing a tactile synergy between her and the hound—one whose senses often outpaced hers, allowing them to respond quickly to danger.

So, instead of bridling, she seized handfuls of its scorching mane. The hellhound's skin was red-hot to the touch, flaking off in charred patches—as if lit ablaze on a pyre.

Diamond Tooth's grasp around the ruff of the hellhound loosed a barrage of odors—a deliciously pungent fug emanating from beneath the hellhound's fur and swirling through her nostrils. An overwhelming sourness of charred pelage, the pungency of rancid flesh and sulfur, the rankness of an ancient cesspit that had been stagnant for decades, the smell of a thousand carcasses, a thousand corpses, an overflowing lavatory stained with excrement and urine. It was an olfactory assault so potent it could

have woken the damned. The stench lingered long after her grip shifted.

She reveled in the moment, drinking in each breath passionately, as though it were the elixir of life itself.

As they traversed further up the daunting mesa, the canyon walls pulsated with a primordial vibration, splitting and fracturing in places. Some fissures were smooth, while others were jagged or littered with thorns. The ashen gray walls seemed to hum a somber melody, enshrouded in minerals and petrified clay and pitted with ancient impressions of long-forgotten beasts. As if making their own ode to second death, the clay walls were gilded with a ruddy hue—remnants of wars past that weren't quite ready to fade into memory. Tears streamed down the aged canyon's face, carried along by bile and viscera trickles.

Far above, the canyon walls wailed. Their tortured cries echoed through the ravine, a deafening dirge from the bowels of the Underworld. The relentless winds howled in wretched agony, shredding Diamond Tooth's ears like claws. It was a chorus of despair, an age-old lament that spoke to the deprivation of this arid land. The sorrowful memories surged around her, a haunting melody for which only she dared to sing along.

The canyon walls slithered into sickly white until they reached the summit of the mesa's uneven, step-like structure. High and arid, the scorching winds offered only a sparse breath of moisture, a bitter taste in the air, like defeat and desperation. But it was unlike the typical aroma of broken hopes of the damned; instead, it reeked of a failed creation, a future promised that was never meant to come to life. It devoured Diamond Tooth's senses, consuming even the savory aroma of barbot soup adrift in the air.

A secluded refuge perched atop the mesa exhaled the

odorous musk. Four spectral globes hovered ominously in perfect alignment above the desolate abode. The crimson-licking tongues of flame that graced the dark sky illuminated their ebony and crumbling surfaces, casting phantasmal shadows on the house. Their surfaces were pitted and scarred, nearly opaque from the ravages of time—much like the lumenite stone tucked away in her pocket that no longer glimmered with its divine light.

The four sinister celestial bodies hung motionless in their stations like silent moons—though she had never beheld the moon herself, only illustrations from her old crony Cross. She could never get permission to leave the Underworld, and after all the gates had been destroyed, she would never explore the world of the living and satiate her schadenfreude.

Two infant barbots patrolled the cliff dwelling, screeching like birds of ill omen. Their tamed nature further indicated that somebody—perhaps Carson himself—inhabited this ancient mesa.

The hellhound's vicious barks cracked through the air, its hackles raised.

The young fledglings scattered in fear, their tiny wings flapping as they darted behind the decrepit and forsaken house.

Diamond Tooth descended from the hellhound's back. Shimmering with feldspar and quartz, the arid land cracked beneath her heel as she stepped into the searing heat.

A peculiar apparition erupted from behind the neglected well and hovered hesitantly, its head disproportionately large for its diminutive frame. Its mismatched ruach parts appeared haphazardly tethered, like a makeshift collage of disparate puzzle pieces. Then, the bizarre wraith lunged with uncharacteristic agility into

the abode, presumably to alert Carson of his imminent doom.

Diamond Tooth yearned for his terror, relishing in his anticipation of an impending massacre; it heightened her lust for destruction when her victims were cognizant of her presence. The scent of dread emanating from her victim was akin to consuming delectable hors d'oeuvres before a sumptuous feast.

Like an ancient storm rolling through the clouds, a deep growl erupted from the hellhound. Its paw pounded the ground, sending a shuddering tremor through the earth, its claws screeching against the rock and dirt. Its bloodshot eyes, rimmed with dried gunk and splattered with mud and sand, glowed with red embers. Parts of its patchy fur fell off its muscular frame, revealing legs raw from scabs and runny sores, while dead skin and scaly tissue covered its snout. Yet, even in their mangy state, hellhounds were one of the most dangerous creatures in the Underworld; their bite could rend apart even the toughest of squal's torsos.

But unleashing the hound would rob Diamond Tooth of the glee of the hunt.

"Allow me." She gestured for the pup to stay outside as she stepped onto the threshold of the home.

Far across the room, a family—mother, father, and two children—lingered. An odd sight; never had she encountered an entire family in the Underworld.

Diamond Tooth took in their fear and desperation, savoring the moment at the threshold and reveling in their collective anguish. Their fear seeped through her astral layers like a balm, a languid wave of despondency that empowered her with joyous mirth.

Carson wiped the mist from the glass façade of the dome around his head. A larger contraption encased his

waist, and hundreds of sewn sutures festooned his ruach where the injured fool had painstakingly stitched himself back together to mend the injuries he had sustained during wars, wounds that would remain unhealed under the medical supervision of the Underworld.

It gnawed at Diamond Tooth that Carson bore his disfigurement with such equanimity, almost as if he had accepted it. He wafted a spicy aura of sufferance and toleration. And he was certainly not afraid of Diamond Tooth's presence like the rest of the family, whose sugary dread permeated the air as thickly as flour in a mill room. Carson's fragrance was one of disgusting indomitable courage.

Carson had to have known the risks of someone tracking him down and had probably prepared a plan for any unwelcome intruder. Oh well.

Most could never have expected Diamond Tooth; more often than not, souls would underestimate her because of her unassuming exterior. Despite her attempts to obscure her visage with unkempt hair and her rejection of all superficial trappings, she still failed to chase away any notion of physical intimidation. Yet she never used her beauty to seduce, as she prided herself on making her adversaries understand her strength through violent action instead.

She could have adorned herself with the most sumptuous of finery, doused her hair in perfumes and varnishes, and draped herself in silken garments that would drive any man or woman to delight. Yet, she saw no need; the thing that called to her carnal cravings, ever beckoning her closer, was not a pleasurable frivolity or an innocent pastime. The object of her affection and desire belonged to only one thing: sin. And she had no need to look attractive or presentable for eyes to commit such atrocities. And what

beauty she possessed only further emboldened her to wreak havoc on anyone anytime she pleased.

Carson and his wife exchanged knowing glances.

The wife was armless. A false arm swayed on a string hung around her neck like an ornament. The entire family had taken on the uncanny semblance of something pieced together from disparate ruach parts. The daughter's head was far too large for her tiny frame as she cautiously eyed her mother. The mother's artificial arm lovingly encircled her offspring as they ambled out the back door with their son close behind. It was a depressing vision that brought perverse joy to Diamond Tooth.

Diamond Tooth marched into the home with a sense of entitlement, her heeled boots clacking against the tiled, chessboard-colored floor.

Four brooms sprung to life as if summoned by some unseen force and swept up the dirt that had followed in her tracks.

Diamond Tooth stepped fearlessly past a teetering tower of boxes that defied the expected laws of gravity, miraculously stacked on the ceiling instead of the floor. Without invitation, she settled at the dining table and availed herself of a generous bowl of barbot soup.

Carson sat opposite her, his eyes fixed on her as if they were locked in a silent battle, until the glass encasement around his head beclouded.

He cleared the fogged glass with a rag. "So," he said. "Rowings sent you."

Diamond Tooth smiled. She spooned more soup into her mouth and savored each savory slurp without replying.

Carson sighed and said, "Let Rowings know I don't have any new details. I only want to keep living in whatever peace I can snatch up. Tell him he should do the same; he's

only bringing us both anguish. There's no point in searching further. The final Torana has vanished, and we will never locate it again."

Diamond Tooth poised the spoon before her lips; her head perked up in rapt attention as soon as she heard mention of the Torana. Rowings had promised nothing about such a thing when he hired her to track down Carson. He would pay extra for keeping in the dark. But as far as Diamond Tooth knew, the Master had annihilated all gates that permitted the damned to escape from the Underworld. Now, it seemed like Rowings and Carson had discovered one. She hungered for more knowledge regarding their findings. And it was clear that Carson had more to share, so Diamond Tooth eagerly gulped a hearty swallow of soup—an unspoken summons for him to divulge further secrets.

The silence in the room thickened as Carson hesitated. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and guarded. "We tried to unearth the burial site further, but only as far as we could manage without witnesses. We had to cover it up, and when we returned sometime later, it was gone—no trace of it remained. I can't tell Rowings what happened to the gate. Maybe the Master destroyed it like all the others. Our opportunity is gone now. Please go back and tell him that."

Diamond Tooth clenched her fist, and the tiger claws of her bagh nakhs sliced out from her knuckles. She used the knives to carve a piece of bread from a loaf but failed to provoke an ounce of terror within Carson's stony facade.

Carson watched her in stillness, his fear unassuming and inert in the face of Diamond Tooth's formidable talons. She inwardly sighed as she planned another way to coerce him into cowering.

"Rowings knows that you've made contact with Tivoli." Diamond Tooth sluiced a spoonful of barbot bouillon

around her mouth, allowing its flavor to linger on her tongue for a few moments more before she swallowed. "He may even have harbored some curiosity about this Torana affair as well. But I'm here for one purpose and one alone: to get Tivoli's true name."

"Why do you think Tivoli's using a fictitious name?" Carson asked.

If Tivoli had used his authentic moniker, Diamond Tooth would have located him. Every spirit's genuine appellation bore a distinct fragrance that she could distinguish from the others in the Underworld. Authentic names were more potent than aliases, as their odors were natural and laden with the ruach's distinct Conscience, Fellowship, and Intuition, while the latter emitted an unvaried aroma —false and characterless. She could still track any sobriquet or pseudonym, but their insipid scent usually led her astray.

Diamond Tooth lifted her gaze from the ebbing cauldron of barbot soup and locked eyes with Carson through his glass confinement.

In the background, a youth's sketch was pinned to the paneled wall. It depicted Carson, his wife, and two oval-headed children, one a girl and the other a boy. The illustration of the boy stood out in particular, not only because his arms appeared crafted of iron thorns but also because he had been pigmented darker than the rest of the family as if they anointed him as the most beloved family member.

It was so apparent in hindsight: Diamond Tooth's calculated move to terrorize Carson would be to strike him where it would hurt most: his family.

"I've got to hand it to you," Diamond Tooth said. "I've never seen a spirit stitch themselves back together, let

alone an entire family. That must have taken great care and precision to get all those pieces fitting just right."

Diamond Tooth let her spoon clatter into the bowl of soup. Broth droplets splashed in every direction.

Carson's glass helmet fogged up, and beads of sweat trickled down his brow. His trembling fingers scrubbed the steam away from the glass with the tattered rag. Anxiety tinged his every movement and filled the air with its sweet aroma.

"Balfour," Carson said. "Clem Balfour. That's Tivoli's new alias." He rose from the table and reached into a cabinet.

Diamond Tooth clenched her fists beneath the table, aiming the pair of bagh nakhs through the ancient timber and priming them for action. She was ready to fire the knives through the wood at a moment's notice, each weapon honed with expert precision. Her senses were acutely aware of every subtle movement as Carson slowly moved away from the cabinet.

"I'll offer you something better than the three objects Rowings is paying you to burn me." Carson retrieved an object from the cabinet by its tether, lifting it reverently.

In his hands, he offered a brass disk with thin plates inside, inscribed with ancient engravings encircling the circumference. On top of the relic was another brass piece set into an ecliptic circle.

"This is the key to the gate," Carson said. "Only the bearer of this astrolabe can pass through the Torana and into the realm of the living."

His gaze bore into Diamond Tooth's as he deposited the astrolabe on her table. The clocklike hands of the antiquated device twirled in mysterious symmetry while the ecliptic circle and plates moved with an unnatural grace.

The archaic symbols etched onto the back formed the Sigil of Ameth, shimmering within the light and holding an unspoken power.

"That would be a useful object," Diamond Tooth said. "If I knew where to find a Torana."

"You're a demon," Carson said. "Unlike me, you answer directly to the Master, who I'm sure would bestow glorious rewards upon one who returned this object. You might become a duke, a king, or even the president! You'll discover so many of the Master's many mysteries that the Torana will become almost worthless."

"But if it does what you say, why would you not hold on to it and find another gate? You could get your family out here."

Carson lowered his eyes to the glass container that sealed his ruach. "It was a fool's errand from the start. I'd just bring destruction upon us all. But I've now accepted death. There's nothing out there for me. So you must take it and go! Leave me and my family alone."

"If I could be content with that," Diamond Tooth said, "I'd go. But there's something I need from you more than anything else, and the only way for me to get it is by burning you and your family."

Carson secreted a syrupy fog of terror, which didn't arise from his own destitution but was spurred on by his family's welfare. Diamond Tooth had inhaled that succulent aroma of dread too many times not to recognize it.

Carson's eyes widened, and his chest heaved as he reached for a weapon inside the glass box at his waist.

But it was all too late for him. Diamond Tooth had only delayed her assault for so long just to savor every ounce of his dread that hung still in the atmosphere before burning him to second death because as soon as she reduced him to

a pile of ash, every bit of his terror would dissipate into nothingness, forcing her to start all over with a new victim.

Sish. Seven blades blasted off Diamond Tooth's gauntlets. They ripped through the table like a knife through paper, pulverizing the glass that encircled Carson's midsection and embedding themselves deep into his vulnerable spirit, leaving behind a trail of black liquid.

As he gasped in agony, a new set of sleek claws grew seamlessly into her bagh nakhs, replacing those that had just been fired from her fists.

Carson vainly attempted to keep his uprightness, but it was an exercise in futility. His vigor flickered as he burned to second death; energy drained from him, his ruach extinguished. He became a petrified ebony effigy, an impassive husk of his former self, frozen in place as a vacant obsidian monument.

Diamond Tooth rose from her chair and touched her finger to his forehead, forcing him backward.

But instead of plummeting to the ground, he floated up toward the ceiling in an explosion of destruction. Shards of his hollowed ruach showered the area, leaving behind a coating of pitch black on the surface above.

Until now, Diamond Tooth believed she had witnessed every oddity that dwelt within the netherworld, yet this inversion left her flabbergasted.

The enchanted brooms pirouetted and somersaulted across the room in a flurry of activity as they rose gracefully to the high ceiling. They collected Carson's ash, weaving cobwebs with their bristles and forming a fragile heap.

Diamond Tooth snatched the astrolabe from the table. The object was massive, and its sheer girth and weight made it nearly impossible to manage. She struggled to find a suitable place to stow it, as its proportions were too wide

and long to fit into her small pockets or pouches. Carrying it would prove to be quite cumbersome.

But then, with a gentle hum and pulse of energy, the metallic complexities morphed and compressed into a compact form. The once bulky and unwieldy device now glimmered in Diamond Tooth's hand as a delicate trinket, easily wearable on its chain. Despite its reduced size, the intricate engravings and detailed markings were still visible.

She fastened the astrolabe around her neck. The golden device, with its intricate gears and dials, nestled comfortably underneath her blouse, though its sharp edges pricked through the fabric.

Footsteps pounded the ground behind her.

Diamond Tooth whirled towards Carson's daughter.

Sish. Seven blades dug deep into the girl's oblong head.

The child burned and ascended to the ceiling. Her blighted ashes scattered across the checkered ceiling, joining her father.

But Diamond Tooth was not done yet. Two other family members remained for her to feed off.

Diamond Tooth strode out of the house, eagerly anticipating the harrowing shrieks of a mother and son who had just discovered the ash clouds within.

Their screams, wrenching and terrible, hit her like a wave as their grief reached a fevered pitch.

Diamond Tooth lingered, savoring every moment of their luscious despair. This was the real benefit of burning Carson and his daughter. Although she could not carry the mother's and son's lingering anguish with her, its potent energy was enough to fulfill and revitalize her for many sleep cycles like a haunting specter.

Diamond Tooth closed her eyes and submerged herself in the shattered family's saccharine agony and heartache.

Glistening chimes reverberated through her mind. Magnificent rainbows cascaded across her sight.

But, all too soon, the incandescent Underworld sky violently surged back into her awareness.

Fuck!

The revitalization process of her diablerie hadn't lasted as long as she had wished. Despite siphoning such potent grief, it wasn't enough; it was never enough, and she soon needed to augment both the repetition and extremity of her sinful acts to reach the same heights of elation that used to stem from trivial misdeeds.

Diamond Tooth buried her tiger claws deep into the hellhound's muzzle.

The beast yelped in pain and staggered back.

But castigating the hound could never reverse the apathy that now engulfed her; it only compounded the dizzying vacuum of the unsustainability of her means and its scale. Not that she felt any remorse for skewering the hellhound—she didn't. It was pointless to inflict more pain on a beast that malice had already tainted.

Standing at the cliff's edge, Diamond Tooth beheld the impenetrable wall that marked the border between Paradise and the Underworld on the horizon. Its sickening halo of luminescence beckoned her closer yet repulsed her. Paradisiacal in name yet infernal in nature, it was a land she dreaded more than any other.

But Rowings, her employer, was awaiting her arrival behind the wall on the main island of Mag Mell, where she intended to embark on a pressing conversation with him concerning Toranas—a threshold of untold mysteries and

destinies waiting to be unlocked, a thought that twisted her blackened spirit with unbearable anticipation.

Diamond Tooth leaped onto the back of the hellhound without pause, her agile form blending with its muscular silhouette as they plummeted down the canyon walls at breakneck speed toward her cruel fate.

2 - THE A'RAF

After many sleep cycles of steadfast travel, Diamond Tooth's hellhound abruptly stopped several paces away from the A'raf—the looming wall that partitioned Paradise from the rest of the Underworld.

The hound's nostrils flared as Diamond Tooth coaxed it closer, but its ugly yellow eyes were filled with dread. It whimpered pitifully and backed away, tail tucked between its legs, ears drooping close to its head. Even from that safe distance, it seemed to sense the wall's malice.

Diamond Tooth swung her leg over the trembling hound, and with one last kick, she set it free. It scuttled away into the hazy darkness.

Now, her return journey was uncertain—she'd need to find a new traveling beast if the wall's defenses didn't annihilate her, and her chances of making it through were slim.

The lumenite stone Diamond Tooth had seized from Rowings secured her passage through the A'raf. It once hummed a heavenly chorus and shimmered with an ethereal luminescence, radiating a riot of prismatic hues that spanned the expanse of the visible spectrum. But the crystallized nephesh was now irreparably damaged from the unfettered exposure to the Underworld's elements, abated

further by a ceaseless degradation because of its disunion from its original emplacement. Had she been able to embed it within the cavity of her ruach like a blessed soul, the stone would have endured countless traversals through the wall. But now, it would scarcely brave even a few treks past the wall—at best. At worst, it might well be decimated in an instant, along with her.

She cupped the stone in her hands and inched ever closer to the A'raf, reverberating energy that caused the hairs on her arm to stand.

The colossal wall stretched from the northernmost fringes of the Underworld and trailed all the way to its southernmost edge, as far as any spirit had ever dared to venture, and returned to tell the tale. There was no escape from its grasp or feasible way to get past, below, or above it.

The grand edifice ascended brilliantly into the flames in the sky, yet they never consumed its ethereal form; instead, even they cowered away in fear from the divine construction.

No gate or door presented itself; this wall was not made of stone, metal, or anything else tangible. It stood firm on its power and dignity, forged from a physical representation of peace, love, and community.

But gods had not graced Paradise for eons, if they ever existed there at all, because even its glow could not defy the truth of its purpose; the A'raf was just a shining prison gate. Paradise was a cage, and the blessed souls imprisoned within chose an afterlife of voluntary captives. It seemed the gods had only constructed Paradise to placate their devoted worshipers who failed to ascend into the actual Heaven, convincing them to give thanks for their meager afterlives. This meant they would not start considering

what they lacked in the afterlife, as nothing was appreciable about it.

Paradise, after all, was only a remote corner of the Underworld, and the pious were locked in and sealed off from reality, preserving nothing remarkable. Their Paradise—which some falsely referred to as Heaven—was nowhere near as holy as the tales proclaimed. It was a feeble imitation, a cruel joke, and a tease. This was why a demon such as Diamond Tooth could breach and infiltrate the realm with little consequence.

Diamond Tooth paused before the desolation that lay before her. Pits and crevices, charred by fire and filled with the ashen remains of burned spirits, were strewn across the desolate landscape. The chasms stirred endlessly along the length of the wall, reaching far beyond the horizon and growing in magnitude as they approached the wall's base.

The deities had deceived the pious souls beyond the wall into believing they had erected its ramparts to keep evil out. The defenses, when triggered, were lethal beyond measure—it had certainly sent more souls to their demise than Diamond Tooth ever had. She had witnessed the wall obliterate ignorant and brazen entities who'd dared to trespass the haven's bounds. It would even strike down those blessed with wings before they could ascend halfway up the wall, and beyond that, only a barbot could surmount the flaming skies without being incinerated. But if Diamond Tooth, the demon of pain and suffering, could enter Paradise, anyone else would have the same opportunity.

The A'raf's defenses were less a security measure than a means of disguise, shielding the blessed souls' knowledge of the natural world—the Underworld, lurking ever-present in the dark shadows right next door to their

Paradise. No matter how much they blissfully pretended or the mental acrobatics of denial they performed, the pious still dwelled in the Underworld like all other members of the damned. Diamond Tooth would love to expose that harsh truth to the naïve and observe the shock reign over their eyes, relishing their shattered concept of existence. But not today.

Diamond Tooth took a calculated step towards the A'raf.

An intricate amalgamation of countless voices melded into wails. It tore through the air with hateful lament, shaking the ground with tremors.

Yet she forged ahead, her resolution steady and unshaken by the immense power of this clarion call of annihilation. She would not be deterred.

Like a white-hot dagger hurled from the heavens, a blazing streak of brilliance burst out of the wall. Its crackling electric tendrils lashed the ground before her with the destructive force of a thousand screams, setting off a fierce explosion.

The earth trembled beneath Diamond Tooth's boots, and a deafening clap assailed her ears as if the world had split in two. Heat rushed over her with destructive force, searing against her astral surface like a thousand fiery tongues. Smoke billowed up from the blast's epicenter; the last warning she would receive.

Still unfazed, Diamond Tooth charged onward.

Several bolts of lightning lashed out like razor-sharp claws, striking Diamond Tooth's ruach mercilessly, but the mighty lumenite in her grasp protected her beneath its veil of divine light. Gritting her teeth, she held the lumenite close to her chest with a fistful of determination. She bent

her head low against the bombardment of agitated lightning forks.

The closer she inched to the wall, the more wrathful the display grew. Hundreds of lightning bolts turned into thousands, as though spawned by an army of vengeful gods, until an all-encompassing tempest of electric fury and buzzing static encased her.

Closer still, the lumenite pulsed against her sweaty palm, its heat steadily increasing as it fought against its fatal demise.

And then all went silent as Diamond Tooth finally reached the wall.

The lumenite exerted its deific force, tugging at the wall before her, melting a section into a translucent and dreamlike state. It bowed into an arch around her, curving and deforming like a bubble, shaping a doorway.

Diamond Tooth crossed the threshold between the two distinct realities as though traversing from one room to another. And on the other side, a luminous brightness assaulted her senses.

She squinted; her eyesight would never adjust to the new environment as her vision was built only for the Underworld's darkness.

The lumenite's viridescent energy drained, its vitality exhausted, and the stone crumbled in Diamond Tooth's hands, dispersing into a fine layer of powder between her calloused fingers.

She was now trapped in Paradise, for she knew of no other way that could grant her passage beyond its threshold. Her only way out of Paradise was to steal a new stone from the chest of a blessed soul, but there lay another problem—burning one of the righteous would invite

retribution from an even greater force than the wall's defenses—the ankou. Yet she would take the risk if it meant freedom.

CHAPTER 6
EBONY BIRD

1 - CROSSROAD

Gimlet staggered through the desolation of Xibalbá for hours on end. Her gait, which had been strong when they'd set out, was now sluggish and labored. Her hooves must've ached from the jagged terrain she traversed, and the blazing heat of the fiery sky above was wearying.

Above all, she had to bear the burden of both her and Cross's weights as well as Cross's miscellaneous articles collected along his odyssey; both were pushing her endurance to its limits. She deserved some reprieve, no matter how brief it might be.

Cross tugged on Gimlet's reins, coaxing her to a stop. He scrutinized their surroundings, searching for a post to anchor the cornurus's tether. Alas, there was nothing but desolation as far as the eye could see—an endless expanse of barren land with no sign of spiritual activity. No buildings, no structures—just the silent crossroad on the edge of an eerie emptiness.

The stillness was so persistent that Cross could hear Gimlet's breath—a reminder of how alone they were.

He shuddered, shrugging off the unsettling feeling that threatened to envelop him completely. The last thing he needed was to become paranoid in this godforsaken place. So instead, he took a deep breath and focused on what lay ahead.

He stepped into the stirrups and descended from Gimlet's saddle with practiced ease.

Gimlet reared her head, and like a magnet drawn to metal, her eyes locked with Cross's.

"Stretch your legs." Cross rested his palm atop the peak of Gimlet's massive scalp, allowing his digits to drift over the ridges of her rugged hide. He caressed her, tracing the faint anatomy of her horns as he massaged her.

The brush of his hands against her rough hide elicited gentle grunts, which danced in the air like a mother's soothing song. The dirt shifted beneath her hooves as she nuzzled against him; her pleasure was palpable in each beat of his nephesh. Heat pooled from her frame as he placated her with assurances that this was just an interim and they'd be jetting off once more in no time.

Gimlet's spiked tail swished through the heavy air with a subdued tenderness. Despite her titanic size, she glided across the land like a winged creature, ever buoyant against the oppressive gravity that weighed down upon them.

"Don't stray far," Cross said. "This place looks empty, but don't let that fool you."

Though Gimlet couldn't speak, she appeared to comprehend Cross—although not his words precisely. A mysterious connection bound them together in ways he could not have expressed or shown—somehow, it seemed, Gimlet knew his intentions and could even sense his

moods. Despite their connection, her behavior was too often contrary to his orders; it was evident she would deliberately rebel against him for reasons he could not grasp. It became apparent quickly that Gimlet had her own thoughts, desires, and autonomy. This unique relationship reversed roles—Gimlet perhaps even considered Cross to be her pet rather than the opposite. Nevertheless, despite their differences, a strong, undeniable trust connected them.

Cross labored to assemble a makeshift holster from the rope bound through the macuahuitl's handle, as it lacked its own sheath. He knotted the two ends of the rope and wound it around his leg. The flat side of the wooden paddle was snug against his thigh, its grip pointing upwards for quick access. He had fashioned an undignified yet effective contraption; however, its awkwardness hindered his steps slightly. But under the circumstances, it was the best his meager supply could offer.

Cross ambled into the crossroads.

Four majestic roads connected in a complex pattern of shimmering hues: obsidian, alabaster, vermilion, and citrine. Countless stones of varying sizes and shapes had been laid across the surface of each lane.

A deep, reverberating voice bellowed from the obsidian stones, like thunder rolling through a horizon of night. "I shall take thee Northward."

The twisted surrealism of a talking road did not surprise Cross. Countless strange voices spoke in the depths of the Underworld, and a sentient road fit right in to the phantasmagoric landscape.

Yet, something else wasn't right with the talking road; Cross had just traveled this path from the West, not the North, as the road promised. A rumble of unease thrummed

through his ruach as a sinister realization settled over him: The obsidian road was lying.

"I shall take thee Eastward," the glistening white road murmured with a tremor of its ethereal alabaster.

The obsidian road had attempted to betray him, so Cross also harbored deep suspicions about the white road's story. He never trusted the voices that came from places they shouldn't, so he chose a different route. Recollections of his old friend Sinuhe's tales gave Cross solace—stories about how Paradise lay in the East and, encouragingly, how achieving it was possible.

So, with a growing sense of resolve, Cross spun around and situated the Westward obsidian road at his back. Now facing true Eastward, he stood before the burning brilliance of an ascended sky. He could vaguely make out the majestic wall that divided Paradise from the Underworld on the horizon, its glorious luminescence tantalizingly close yet impossibly far away. To his left, shrouded in wintery stillness, was Mount Mictlān in all its vaporous glory, a towering colossus in the frigid North, dwarfing the surrounding Metnal Mountain range below it.

The sickening smell of tortured souls lingered in the air, a miasma that wafted miles away and penetrated even Cross's nose. That odor had greeted him countless times, but one he could never become accustomed to. Like a fog, it smothered his senses and made his wretchedness swell, beckoning visions of the great mountain of fire from which it originated—the Inferno. It stood in the hazy distance to his right, miles away to the South, burning brightly with an orange glimmer visible from within a maelstrom of ebony clouds filled with bellowing thunderclaps and flaring lightning strikes.

The East road made a fierce rumble, sending sharp red

stones scattering everywhere. "Follow mine path Southward," it bellowed with a voice as coarse as sand.

In contrast, the South road spoke in a friendly whisper, its yellow stones wobbling to and fro like cheerful little suns. "Follow mine path Westward," it said with an inviting tone.

Confirmation had been given; all the roads were false, sowing discord among the unsuspecting. In Cross's early days in the afterlife, he would have been dumbfounded why they sought to confound him, but he realized that he'd drive himself madder seeking a rationale for the Underworld's lunacy than if he merely accepted its chaotic nature as it was.

The Underworld created inconsistency when one required order the most. It upended its rules on a whim. And whenever Cross thought he'd comprehended its countless secrets, something so outlandish would transpire that it would unsettle everything he believed he knew. He relinquished trying to penetrate its depths and made peace with its insidiousness, embracing it without reserve.

Cross disregarded the babbling highways and deliberated between evading the bounty hunters and heading to his holy destination. The Inferno was renowned as the very core of the Underworld—in the truest sense of mortality. Despite the mountain of fire being in its dormant state, no spirit, not even devils, demons, nor the divine, would willingly traverse there because of the peril of incurring multiple deaths or annihilation at the hands of the Master. Any of Cross's bounty hunters would have predicted him to dart directly to Paradise and not venture towards the Inferno. But heading towards the Inferno would take him more than a few sleep cycles off target, elongating his quest, and risking increased danger.

2 - BLACK RAIN

Gimlet scampered over to Cross, showing she was eager to move on again. Cross mounted the saddle, and they set off down the Southern road—the actual one that led straight to the abhorrent mountain of fire, home of the Master.

For miles, there remained nothing but barren wasteland stretching out before them, much like the untamed frontiers of the Wild West. Black glass cliffs towered around them, obstructing his glimpse of the Inferno and Paradise's light. The road itself was inconsistent, with patched-up plates of citrine stones scattered in certain places. Eventually, the jerky ride ended as they arrived at a river with no water but a murky yellowish-brown muck.

Cross leaped from Gimlet's saddle, the leather creaking under his weight. He reached for a nearby stone and sent it skimming across the yellow river with a flick of his wrist.

The rock traversed the silent muck, and not even a single ripple followed. The sluggish current thickened with sludge that looked like it could withstand even the rapid gallop of Gimlet's hooves.

He swung atop Gimlet's saddle. The bull-headed lizard quivered beneath him as he tugged at the reins and steered her away from the fetid riverbank, aiming to give her a broad enough gap to reach her peak velocity, affording them the optimum opportunity to traverse the river. Then, he kicked her flank to urge her into a run.

But Gimlet had other ideas. She stood firm and puffed in defiance. Her skittish hooves dug into the ground, refusing to budge an inch from her spot.

Cross leaned over the titanic head of his beloved

cornurus and pressed his lips to her leathery ear, whispering against the chipped horn that protruded from her ear as if imparting a precious secret.

"I don't want to go in that stinking river either," he said. "But you know where I do want to go? Paradise. Don't you want to go to Paradise, Gimlet? I hear they have all the hodders you could ever eat."

He could only speculate, for his single foray into Paradise had concluded centuries ago—a fleeting visit of only an hour of confusion and stress before he was unceremoniously ejected. He didn't remember seeing the slightest trace of hodders in those brief moments spent in that heavenly realm. And his memories were so perfect that spirits tried to steal them. But it seemed possible; tales of its splendor were surely exaggerated to some degree, but if Paradise contained all sorts of fantastical creatures and divine chattel, then why wouldn't these mischievous rodents have found their way there, too? Infesting every corner of the Underworld as they did?

"I know this isn't the way to Paradise," he continued. "But if we're going to get there, we have to go this way first. We have to cross this river. If you run your fastest, I think we can make it all the way across without falling in."

He cupped his hands on the crown of Gimlet's head, and the cornurus reared away, hurtling towards the river.

She veered to a stop as her hooves skidded across the pebbles up to the lip of the embankment.

They both plunged into the viscous mire in a split second, with minimal disruption to its placid surface.

Cross rose in the river, keeping his head above the yellow, infected sludge. He wiped the foul muck from his eyes but was met with a nauseous stench worse than Gimlet's backside.

Gimlet snorted, a flurry of stinky silt billowing out from her enormous nostrils and broad lips.

Cross grasped the reins, providing gentle yet firm guidance as he led her out of the murky river.

The affront to their misery was compounded when inky rain poured down from the ebony clouds. The vile combination of black, oily rain, and yellow effluence from the river coalesced, forming two grotesquely shaped bumblebees out of Cross and Gimlet—particularly Gimlet with her bulbous hindquarters. The pungent aroma of a hundred outhouses billowed around them and clung to their bodies like a thick shroud.

Finding new clothes was daunting, but Cross needed something clean. His reek had become unbearable; months of grime and muck assaulted his nostrils and nearly made him retch. He shuddered at the thought of how much he stank. Mrs. Carson, the old matriarch of the family he used to serve while alive, would not have stood for this. The accumulated filth was enough to gag even the most seasoned demons.

3 - TREMBLING CANYONS

The oppressive deluge of black rain intensified as Cross and Gimlet drew perilously near to the sinister, foreboding Inferno. Its impenetrable walls soared into the sky of flame, smoke, and ash, with crimson rivers spewing down its slopes like bloodied whips lashing its prisoners in the bottomless pits of Hell. The raging flames illuminated the gloom like countless pieces of fiendish jewelry against an onyx backdrop.

The black rain cascaded in violent sheets as if the Underworld itself sought to douse their virtue with wickedness. It lashed at them with such rage that Cross and Gimlet could not continue their arduous trek.

They sought refuge from the wailing storm in the fissures of the trembling canyons. As if repulsed by their presence, the looming mountains around them occasionally shuddered and sneezed out smothering dust.

Beneath the sheltering rocky overhangs, Cross unpacked his dirty rag and began the laborious task of wiping away the oily rain and yellow pus caked onto both himself and Gimlet's bodies. He had stored that rag in her saddlebag since they first set off on their grand adventure with Cottontail.

He carefully scooped the gunk from her eyes, unbuckled her saddle with an attentive touch, and removed it. He scraped away at her scaly spine and sturdy legs with a flat slab of stone before the mucus could dry and harden, restricting her movements. Despite putting in meticulous care, some purplish crud lingered after he was finished, coating much of her body in an abrasive blanket. Yet at that point, he had done all he could sans water. The rest would eventually flake away.

4 - JAGGED TERRAIN OF EPHEMERAL ALABASTER

The skies of the Underworld burned in an endless blaze, dimming and brightening in various colors, tangerine flames succumbing to indigo as if governed by the Master. The concept of day and night meant nothing here; each spirit kept their personal measure of time, tracking their

own sleep cycles, blindly striving for a sense of normalcy in this diabolical realm.

And Cross remained in the quavering canyons for several sleep cycles with his loyal cornurus, Gimlet, for things to cool down. Cross's pursuers were likely striding toward Paradise, which meant he was lagging them and no longer being trailed, chasing them instead of being hunted.

With this much-desired respite, Cross and Gimlet, at long last, forsook the quivering canyons and their citrine trail for the shimmering white path eastward over the jagged terrain of ephemeral alabaster.

5 - THE RUDIMEN

A dry maelstrom coated Cross's tongue and sinuses with a chalky saltiness. He spat the harsh, briny flavor from his mouth as a mesmerizing tempest of yellow dust, lavender glows, orange sands, and many other hues fought each other in an unstructured eruption of potent sorcery.

The wind roared. It shook the ground beneath Gimlet, the tremors surging through her spirit and reaching Cross saddled on her back.

Ripples of sand cannoned around like bullets shot from a gun. Tendrils of gravel spiraled around in a massive, tightly knit, and all-encompassing sphere, masking everything in an oppressive blanket of dense debris clouds.

A heavy fragrance of lemons and vinegar, with hints of spices and mint, crashed against Cross's nose.

Voices carried in the wind, screaming words from beyond, entrapped in the suffocating dust storm. Long-lost

desert apparitions wailed in Cross's ears; their dissonant cries pierced his skull like tiny daggers.

He clapped his hands to his ears, and Gimlet reared up, throwing Cross off her back and into a wall of black air.

The wind took Cross until he hit the sandy floor with a thud, rolling into the funnel's center. The winding vortex trapped him inside. This was not an ordinary dust storm.

Fragments of rock and pebble shot from the funnel cloud in a frenetic display, bounding off one another and coalescing into three figures with hollow orbits and gaping maws.

As the rubble birthed these celestial beings, an ethereal chant resonated around Cross in the form of a shrill, dissonant ululation combined with the staccato thumps of rocks and stones.

The entities were composed of splintered wood and tiny stones that clinked and clattered. The apparitions' eerie keening grew louder as the vortex encircled him. They remained motionless, only their skulls moving slightly, and their gazes fixed on him.

Thankfully, these rudimentary life forms never concerned themselves with the fleeting moments of nostalgia other spirits tried to steal from Cross's memories. However, they were infamous for their penchant for devouring souls and amalgamating with them to become a unified being. With every successful annexation of another being, their existence only grew more powerful until they would one day become whole.

The tempest raged, and with it came an unforgettable sight. Thick dust clouds settled on their tattered remains, encasing their decrepit forms in a filthy embrace. Various objects rolled about their incomplete frames—a porcelain doll's pigtail jutted from a crudely constructed cheek; a

silver spur spun atop one shoulder; and a small kettle pumped rhythmically through a broad chest, like a grim substitute for a beating heart. The three ragtag creations stumbled onward, existing out of tune with all that was right in the world.

Cross had always relied on his own mettle to stand a fighting chance against the squals because they were killable, but this encounter was one that he could not hope to win.

Refusing to accept defeat, he removed his macuahuitl from its makeshift holster, strapped securely around his thigh.

The vortex plucked the obsidian blade from his hands and consumed it in the overwhelming shadows of the stygian cloud.

The rudimen glided towards him without flexing their legs as if sliding across a sheet of ice; grains of desert accumulated up their calves along the way. Unfeeling expressions stretched across their faces as they advanced closer to him. Their knotted fingers curled and clutched, intending to capture Cross in the desert.

"Dni mlu fitu aeb." The hissing and crackling of their whispers blended together until it became a single song, like a wild forest fire burning in unison with a thousand rattling serpents.

"Suet elp moce sa elp." The voices were hushed but sinister, like an archaic incantation in a language long forgotten by the rest of the world. The words were indecipherable yet still infiltrated Cross's mind like a heavy mist that refused to clear, bouncing off the other rudimen and vibrating throughout his surroundings. It started as a low-frequency hum that gradually built in intensity. It reached a

crescendo, pulsing through Cross's head until it felt like his skull was about to shatter.

Ghastly mouths materialized on the faces of the apparitions, wide and yawning, forming circles of swirling abyssal portals as though each phantom were an entrance into a different realm entirely.

Pressure constricted Cross's ears. His mind uncoiled like a stream of taffy. A titanic force seized his ruach before releasing with a loud pop—as if a champagne bottle had been uncorked—infusing his very being with an effervescence, unlike anything he'd experienced before...

Cross plunged into a sea of milk and drifted into a blissful void. The creamy ocean washed away any recollection of his past. Everything he had ever neglected, every dream hidden away, melted away. Three benevolent men embraced him with unconditional love, bestowing on him the peace and affection he yearned for and promising to care for him for eternity. Grateful for their kindness, he gave himself entirely to them, his nephesh a necessary component in bringing them closer to fulfilling their very purpose. He was content helping these newfound friends, but their serenity was shattered as the milky river evaporated and the lake's bed caved in, leaving gaping fissures in its wake...

Pressure on Cross's chest and head yanked him harshly back to the dismal reality of the Underworld. He lay face down in the dirt, ash blanketing his astral surface, as he found his slurring tongue almost involuntarily begging the rudimen to return.

Whip-like thunder snaps ripped through the maelstrom and scorched the air, a high-pitched shriek flapping through the sandstorm like a scythe. These sounds had chaotic energy as if the atmosphere itself had been imbibed

with electricity that filled the air with each blast—electrifying and admonishing, warning of a new, unknown terror.

Cross heaved his chest off the dusty ground, yet just as soon as he felt strength come back into his limbs, utter exhaustion pounded through him. His arms gave way, and he sank back to the earth, eyes glazed over in disrepair, straining his neck upwards to glimpse whatever peril lurked beyond his veil of comprehension.

An ebony bird descended upon Cross like a writhing nightmare in the dead of night. It landed between Cross and the rudimen. Its talons gripped the hot, charred sand with a ferocity unmatched by mortals.

Streaks of white-hot lightning surged from its body and coursed through the air like serpents of light; each burst incinerated chunks of the earth around it.

As dust and dirt billowed around Cross in ragged waves, he squinted at the enigmatic figure before him. The flurry of black feathers gave way to cascades of lightning that rippled from its dark wings, driving back the pangs of dust and obscuring them in an ever-growing silhouette of terror, leaving only hellish laughter to be heard among the chaotic din of thunder and flame. Never had he so encountered such a creature: a nightmare made manifest; Cross envisioned its visage must have been twisted and abhorrent, like something spawned from the most bottomless chasms of the darkest dreams.

The rudimen retreated from the ebony bird. Then, one by one, the rudimen detonated in a spectacular burst of debris and disparate objects. The dust whirlpool subsided, and the sandstorm dissipated as if it had never been there.

A cold lump of dread swelled in Cross's stomach as the macuahuitl clattered mere inches from where he lay, its dull rectangular blades glinting in the firelight.

The shadow of the winged beast crept ever closer, and rage boiled through him like a flood.

He would see justice done for all he had lost at this creature's hands and take revenge for cruelly sending his three new friends away.

Summoning every ounce of strength he had left, he dragged himself closer to his obsidian blade. His hand clasped around the wooden handle, and he lifted it.

But before it could even clear the ground, an oppressive weight landed on it, keeping it firmly in place. A single heavy black boot prevented Cross from wielding his weapon.

He lifted his gaze up the length of the beastly ebony bird, who had initially appeared garbed in a pirate's attire. Before him was not a malevolent bird but the captivating figure of a woman. As he squinted against the blazing sky, he could make out the contours of her face. Gone was his initial impression that she was repulsive, for now he saw with clarity that she was ruggedly beautiful—and that it had been she who had rescued him from the clutches of the rudimen, those wicked spirits who had planted illusions in his mind with their insidious enchantment.

The woman's wings were an abysmal void of darkness that enveloped her from all orients. At certain angles, the firelight would catch the tips of her feathers, which scintillated like stars in a pitch-black sky. The woman tucked her massive ebony wings against her slender back, her feathers whispering sonorously as she altered her stance. She glowered down at Cross, and a chill coursed through him.

Her emotionless gaze was piercing, enigmatic, and unfathomably profound as if her onyx eyes could plumb the depths of his nephesh. She regarded him with neither

warmth nor animosity, only an indefinite stillness that he could not read.

"Smart move, coming this close to the Inferno." She picked up the macuahuitl, saturating the surrounding air with a sharp, musky smell. "You fooled that one-armed squal, but not me."

Her voice resounded with a blend of smooth velvet and savage steel, a captivating combination that drew him in and held him at bay. It was gruff yet gentle, embodying both strength and compassion. Her pirate-like attire perfectly matched her scruffy tone; she wore filthy, sand-colored justacorps, yet she seemed unaffected by their thickness. The wool garment reached down to her knees, and there wasn't even an ounce of moisture on her pale complexion—a sight that Cross found remarkable since he would have been drenched in sweat were he to be cooped up in such a heavy coat, even with it unbuttoned as she wore it.

With a soft thud, she emptied the remains of the sand from her battered top hat. She placed it atop her matted ebony hair and adjusted it atop her head with graceful ease. In its previous life, this hat had endured much in its crusade; its sides were frayed and stitched together with ugly patterns that could only be traced back to the hands of an amateur tailor. Each piece of her wardrobe had been salvaged from an odd concoction of eras, though with an eye for style. Each garment complimented the other, creating a patchwork quilt of a tapestry that was all her own. Skillfully weaving disparate identities into one, she embodied the very essence of uniqueness.

Cross had heard of this woman, renowned throughout the sordid Underworld as the Raven. He had never encountered her in person, yet their lawless circles overlapped.

Fabled as a fallen angel and purveyor of divine chattel, some of which could help to enable Cross to breach the gates of Paradise, he was left with two choices: persuade her to lend them to him or risk stealing them.

But he remembered how his old friend Diamond Tooth, cruelest among the demons of pain and suffering, trembled at the mere mention of the Raven's name. Diamond Tooth was the most menacing spirit he had ever come to know. He had only engaged in a tenuous alliance with the dominatrix inhibitorum for his own preservation, acting as her servus Inhibitus. Now, he was beginning to see how such a strategy could come in handy if he ever needed to broker a similar pact with the Raven, as Bolon-Hunahpu had suggested.

Gritting his teeth, he dragged himself from the dirt and filth, a soul-crushing mixture of terror and resolve coursing through him. His boots found the ground with precision and purpose, grasping hold of the earth beneath him. His ruach grew heavy as he stood there, his astral layers tight and restrained. But with a great deep breath, he composed himself and straightened his stance, determined to face whatever fate had in store for him. Standing tall and proud against whatever evil destiny might sling his way, he set off with unwavering conviction.

"I asked the Great Goddess to send me an angel." Cross's voice quavered, striving to remain even as his fear surged in his breast. He spoke with exultant clarity as if each word were an act of defiance, a valiant attempt to smother the dread that lurked deep within.

"Magna Mater has nothing to do with it," she said. "You can thank the talking tree. He specifically wanted you to know that he pointed me in your direction."

When the Raven spoke, her words were laden with

sagacity and profundity—as if millennia and eons of life had gifted her a wealth of understanding. Each intonation carried a weight of command and perspicacity, a formidable yet kind admonition that she was not to be underestimated. It was as if each syllable was akin to the murmurs of an ancestral whisper, a sibilant melody that he could not resist and yet could not fully trust.

"Well, thanks for coming when you did," he said.

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste," she said, her face expressionless. "How much is that head of yours worth now?"

Cross stood still, every astral layer in his ruach coiled with trepidation.

Was this a test? If she'd come to pursue the payment promised for his capture, then surely she knew how much he was worth?

"Last I heard," he said, "nine objects."

A rope slithered around the Raven's slender waist as if it were alive. The dart at its end lifted on its own accord, almost as if sensing Cross's presence. The dart exploded from its inanimate prison and descended upon Cross, like a cobra rearing its head before striking.

This magical tether was a prime example of an artifact anointed with the potency of celestial beings. Something of this caliber could aid him in his quest to breach the gates of the heavenly realm of Paradise.

Acting with lightning quickness, the rope wound itself around Cross, crushing his arms close against his sides and clamping his legs so until he could no longer stand upright, and he collapsed into the sand below.

Son of a bitch. Here we go again.

CHAPTER 7
THE MAN WHO REMEMBERS

1 - THE RAVEN

Cross's hands were bound behind him. He lay on his stomach, bouncing atop Gimlet's hindquarters as the Raven drove his pet cornurus through the sinister plateaus of black glass.

Gimlet's spiked tail plowed through the obsidian terrain that stretched endlessly before them.

Each jolt to Cross's chest stole away his breath, and yet he still mustered the strength to speak.

"Where're you taking me?" he asked the Raven.

"Metnal," she said.

Cross wiggled like a slithering serpent and slid off Gimlet's back, plunging into the ebony abyss of gravel beneath him.

The Raven unfurled her ink-black wings and vaulted off the Gimlet's saddle. "Where do you think you're going?"

Cross scurried across the obsidian pebbles, slinking away from her. "You can't deliver me to the squals. My memories belong to the rudimen. Cut me loose."

The Raven clutched him by the scalp, squeezing mercilessly. She pried at his eyelid, lifting it as her dark gaze stared out from under her mangled top hat, penetrating deep into his eye. Her maliciousness was palpable in the air, and he could feel her searing hatred burning into him.

"I thought their enchantment had already worn off," she said.

Cross flinched in repulsion. He lurched his head away from her clammy grasp and crumpled down onto the grit below with a clatter.

"Easy there." The Raven's hands stretched out before her, palms upturned. "You're not yourself."

"You don't know me!" Cross said.

"I know enough," the Raven said. "The rudimen did something to your mind. And that might lessen my payment."

"They would never hurt me," he said. "They care about me. They're my true friends."

"And they usually get the soul they come for. Let's hope the damage isn't permanent and you return to normal by the time I turn you over to the squals. I want all the nine objects they're paying me. Nothing less."

The Raven's rope dart loosed at Cross, and the thick rope twined around his ruach like a serpent. It hoisted him from the obsidian stones and returned him to Gimlet's pungent rump.

Cross thrashed in an agonizing dance, his limbs contorting in a futile battle against the supernatural rope's ironclad grip.

"You'll pay for this," he said. "I hope you end up in a bone orchard after you get eaten by devils. Cut me loose, you ugly buzzard."

Sweat poured from Cross's brow as he strained against the unforgiving bindings, seeking to contain and smother the inner fire burning within his nephesh. He twisted with wild desperation and pulled against its constriction and helplessness. The rope entwined every limb with a firmness that strengthened as he writhed. It bit into his ruach with each frenzied motion, yet still, he fought on, spending every ounce of energy, determined to triumph over this insidious foe.

2 - TAKEN

The Raven ferried Cross's unruliness back across the brackish, yellow river. This time, Gimlet galloped across the surface with the urgency of destiny as if to atone for her torpidity on the journey before.

The crossroads tried to beguile the Raven, but she snubbed them, heedless of their deceitful claims, and led Gimlet past the decimated kingdom of Xibalbá and up the Northern road towards the Metnal mountains.

Cross eventually lulled himself into a peaceful state, humming spiritual hymns throughout several sleep cycles like a mantra. The lively melodies stirred something within him, bolstering his spiritual energy and sparking lucidity concerning the rudimen's true nature.

The incomplete apparitions had offered him a haunting glimpse of what it would've been like if he'd gone ahead with erasing his memories and forgetting his past. If he'd combined with those entities, they wouldn't have taken just his memories—they'd have seized his very soul,

bewitching him until nothing but their callous essence remained.

As the Raven had forewarned, the rudimen had tampered with Cross's mind, but now their malevolent spell appeared to have evaporated.

Unfortunately, the Raven was about to deliver Cross to the squals, who would behead him and plunder his memories.

3 - METNAL MOUNTAINS

Gimlet carried Cross and the Raven into the squal-infested Metnal mountains. The flaming skies draped themselves across the jagged cliffs like a mantle of terror, baking every inch of stone beneath their fiery embrace and enshrouding them in their oppressive veil.

Cross had abandoned any resistance by this point, as intransigence became a losing option. Now he bound himself to his own resilience to outlive this disaster. He surrendered himself to his captors, trusting in his wits and intuition to come out of this with his head still attached amidst all this chaos.

An innumerable mass of wretched squals lurked in the shadows as the unlikely trio trudged on, amassing a small following of squals that emerged from the surrounding crevices. A legion of foamy muzzles welcomed them with hisses. Squals glided their gangly talons along Cross's forehead as he passed them.

Cross reared back, jerking his head away and snapping his teeth at the intrusive digits.

The Raven tugged on Gimlet's reins, and the cornurus

stopped at the entrance of a gargantuan cavern. The Raven swung down from the saddle, and her magical rope dart effortlessly hoisted Cross off the Gimlet's back.

The enchanted rope thrust Cross up against a colossal monolith of stone outside the grotto, where a slavering horde of pestiferous squals confronted him. They gnashed their fangs and foamed with vitriol at their flaccid, lipless visages. Hundreds hung out from their rocky abodes perched above like menacing sentinels, ready to unleash more of the wretched horde on him.

Cross hawked a wad of mucus into the Raven's face.

The Raven struck him with a vicious backhand.

He tumbled to the ground, rolling onto his back.

"Untie me," he said. "Then see how tough you think you are. I ain't never been a woman beater, so just let me go right now, and I won't become one. I'll forgive you. You go your way. I'll go mine. We'll forget this ever happened."

The Raven twisted away from Cross, her disdain for him palpable in the humid air. He lay sprawled out on the ground, defeated and powerless, as she evaporated into the depths of the ominous cave. Her footsteps reverberated through the cavern like a heart-wrenching dirge.

"You dirty pigeon," Cross said. "I hope they clip your wings and—"

Cross's throat closed in on itself as the largest squal he had ever beheld stepped forth from the yawning maw of the foggy cave.

The squal stood larger than any of the others, immense and imposing. A sea of lesser squals undulated out of its way, making an aisle for their enormous leader. Each flexing muscle and serrated fang displayed the ferocity of its character.

The colossus stooped to Cross's level. Its steaming

breath stung his eyes as he shuddered and averted his gaze. The chieftain clamped down hard on Cross's chin with one clawed foot, turning his head this way and that as if measuring him for an injury. It meticulously examined every angle of his face.

"You've got the wrong pig in the tail," Cross said. "I'm no one. I don't even remember what I ate for lunch. Did I even have lunch? I don't know; I forget. See, I'm not who you're looking for."

"sss-So, you're not the man who remembers-sss?" The chief squal spoke with a distinguished and serpentine voice, exuding an aura of nobility. His throat rattled and shook with the pronunciation of his words, leaving a nasty hacking emanating from the back of his throat.

"Nope," Cross said. "I'm not him. I don't even know who that is. I'm sure if you keep looking, you'll find—what's his name again? I'm just so forgetful. I never remember anything."

The chieftain's foot remained clamped around Cross's face as he unfurled an aged sheet of vellum with hands that trembled from the force of his malice.

"Do you recogniz-sss-e this-sss man?" The chieftain thrust the vellum into Cross's gaze.

The parchment rustled beneath the squal's talons like dead leaves stirring in a gust. Someone had painted a crude rendition of Cross's figure on it, with the recognizable black speck on the skull denoting the bullet wound on his brow. Below his visage was the clumsy handwriting of the squals. Cross deciphered them to himself in a muted whisper as if they were some vile enchantment, a dark ritual designed to bring misery onto those who would dare recite it aloud: "Nine divine chattel for the capture of the 'Man Who Remembers'."

"Yes-sss, it is-sss you," the chieftain said.

"How can you even see?" Cross said. "All your eyeholes are covered under a layer of skin. And you don't even have eyes under that, you ugly piece of—"

The chief plunged a long and bony toe deep inside Cross's mouth. The abrasive texture of gritty salt crystals and coarse dirt assaulted his taste buds, making him gag.

"Dependenc-sss-e on sss-sight," the chieftain said, "is-sss for those sss-souls-sss who lack faith."

The squal's toe dislodged from Cross's mouth. He retched, desperate to rid himself of the slimy taste in his throat.

The Raven emerged from the dank cave, her gnarled and weathered hands clasping a burlap sack of divine chattel the squals had given her as payment for turning Cross into them.

"The chief's giving her your precious, hard-earned objects!" Cross's voice boomed with righteous wrath, hardened yet grieving, an orchestration of despair and terror. His words reverberated within the cavern walls, but his audience swallowed his fervent plea with unrelenting detachment.

The Raven's slender figure loomed over Cross as he lay haplessly on the ground. Her justacorps fluttered and climbed like a phantom in the wind, stirring the whisper of fabric that seemed to carry some kind of omen. The squeaks of leather and rustles of fabric gave way to an undulating rhythm from her skirts as she walked over him without hesitation. She strode with poise so resolute it almost conveyed invincibility, her stare fixed forward, unyielding and stern.

"Those objects will destroy you." Cross's words rolled off his tongue with force, a maelstrom of irate indignation

and passionate fury as if it were conjured forth from some bottomless abyss deep within the depths of his nephesh.

Something special lingered long after he had finished speaking, as if Cross could perceive her very nature behind the veneer, knowing what kind of person she truly was when no one else could.

"The Great Goddess hates your kind," he continued, hurling accusations at the Raven like a whip. "You know who you are, Raven? I know whose daughter you are. You're the daughter of Lilith, the very first whore!" His words, filled with inexorable intensity and conviction, sealed her fate as he declared it with finality.

The Raven stamped her boot into his gut, leaving a sickening reverberation through his spirit.

He writhed in agony as the rope dart restrained his wrists against his sides. The percussive pain was all he could feel—unbearable torture that threatened to overwhelm him.

"You bitch!" he said. "I never hurt anybody!"

With a sudden jerk, the rope dart flew free and zoomed into the Raven's justacorps, winding around her midsection.

Several squals closed their talons around Cross like vices before lifting him from the ground.

The Raven fastened the bag of divine chattel to Gimlet's saddle before slipping her foot into the stirrups.

"Don't go with her, Gimlet!" Cross's voice rose in raw emotion—a desperate howl of anguish and fury that ricocheted off the cavern walls with a savage intensity, exposing his terror, desperation, and powerlessness. The mournful desolation in his voice trembled through the atmosphere like the tolling of a death knell until his words

trailed away, quivering and dissipating, pleading for one last opportunity to be heard.

Gimlet groaned at him as if she knew her time with Cross was ending, but could do nothing about it. The creature's enormous eyes were downcast in sorrow as if she understood the finality of their parting.

"Gimlet wasn't part of the agreement," the Raven said. "And if she stays, the squals will gladly have her. But she'll end up worse than you." An ethereal silence descended upon the caverns as the Raven spoke. Her words were not uttered harshly or without sympathy, but possessed an unexpected tenderness that spoke of profound empathy and warmth that enveloped Cross's shattered ruach in a comforting embrace. Though the Raven maintained her own agenda, her gentle tone carried unmistakable compassion and a sincere wish for Cross to find solace in the darkness of his affliction and discover serenity.

Fuck peace!

"Take her, you vulture!" Cross said.

The Raven climbed into the saddle of his cornurus and galloped off into the inky shadows of the mountains. The wind howled in their wake, and mist shrouded their path.

A handful of squals reverently laid Cross upon a rugged ceremonial platform and held his limbs while the chieftain intoned a dirge of plaintive prayers in their sorrowful tongue.

Cross begged Magna Mater to stand with him. The air was alive with devotion, desperation, and dread as the mournful cries of supplication filled the sacred space.

"The Great Goddess hates you miserable souls," Cross said. "That's why you're so ugly. You're cursed. You can have my memories. Take 'em. But you'll always be deformed and hideous." Cross's jovial laughter echoed

through the oppressive humidity, despite his terror. Rivulets of sweat ran down his brow and cascaded behind his ear as he braced for what was coming.

The chieftain thrust his clammy hands beneath Cross's chin and curled his sinuous digits around his throat. The repellent spittle of the foul creature pooled on Cross's face, and he shuddered in loathing, petrified beneath the chieftain's menacing, eyeless stare.

"Cross-sss," the chieftain said to the legion of surrounding squals, "known as-sss the Man Who Remembers-sss, wanted in over thirty realms-sss, is-sss finally ours-sss. His-sss neck will be sss-sliced open. His-sss ichor sss-shall flow. His-sss head sss-shall fall into our hands-sss. We sss-shall devour his-sss ruach, and all his-sss memories-sss will be with us-sss. May the Great Goddess-sss have mer-sss-cy on his sss-soul."

"To Hell with all you squals!" Cross yelled, "And all who gave birth to you!"

"To Hell, we have already been." The chieftain hoisted a slab of honed stone, its glimmering blade drawing a fateful outline against the fires in the sky.

The entire encampment erupted in a rapturous hiss of jubilation that meandered through the mountainside, weaving into Cross's soulful screams.

Cross became ensconced in a thick mire of his sweat, tears, and the squal's spittle. His breathing quickened; he found it difficult to draw breath. He clamped his eyes shut, steeling himself for his sentence and the information he knew but wished he hadn't.

Throughout his life and death, people placed heavy demands on him as if he were some marionette—a puppet forever tethered to strings and force-fed laborious tasks. And the exhaustion of it all had engulfed him. Finally, the

idea of release bled into his consciousness, for perhaps this was what he deserved. It would be best if he were to depart into nothingness.

A deafening peal of thunder reverberated around Cross, electrifying the air and rippling through his chest. He recognized that searing crack. It had thundered just before the Raven swooped in and rescued him from the rudimen.

Cross fluttered his eyelids open as screeches of terror filled every crevice in the caverns.

The chieftain's spirit was cast into an erratic whir as he flew over Cross before violently crashing into the towering slab of jet-black granite.

Cross rose from his bed on the sacrificial stone and bolted away from the behemoth rock.

Every squal peered up at the murky mountainside where Cross's savior stood. Her majestic wingspan spread out devilishly, and the skirt of her justacorps flapped and snapped in the stifling wind.

Light rays snaked from her midriff and cracked into the squals nearest Cross like lightning bolts. But it wasn't lightning; the noise and lights emanated from her magical rope dart that acted on her behalf, yet seemed to possess its own will.

The Raven swooped down from her perch and landed on Gimlet's saddle. Her gaze fell on Cross, and she stalled, as though waiting for him to join her on Gimlet's saddle.

Cross finally saw the truth. The Raven had used him as bait to defraud the squals of their precious, divine chattel. It was a tried-and-true con Cross had used in his own life countless times before. And the Raven executed her role flawlessly. But he felt sheepish about not being informed of the grand charade, and if he had, he could have supported her. And with his neck on the line, he would ensure she

included him in the reward. But escaping squal territory without burning was their biggest challenge now.

Cross barreled through a throng of three distracted squals.

They careened to the ground.

The Raven's rope dart twirled and snaked its way through the air with lethal precision as if it were the serpentine tongue of some mythical beast, poisoning each squal it touched with second death. It left a shimmering trail in its wake as it lashed out and withdrew rhythmically, clearing Cross's path straight toward his guardian angel.

As he neared the Raven, she tossed his macuahuitl in his direction, its obsidian blades gleaming in the gloomy firelight as it arced through the air.

He caught the obsidian blade, curled his hands around its wooden handle, and cleaved through every squal in his path. He reached the Raven, and

The Raven extended her hand and hoisted Cross onto Gimlet's bare back.

Cross curled his arms around the Raven's waist, and the trio galloped away from Metnal at breakneck speed, their pursuers trying to keep up, but Gimlet bashed multiple squals with thunderous swings of her spiked tail, sweeping them all away.

4 - FRESH FRUIT

As they galloped away together, Cross held the Raven tight from behind her, his arms trembling with anticipation around her waist as she guided Gimlet's reigns.

The coarse fibers of the rope dart bound their embrace

with thick knots at her midsection, designed for an unbreakable union, large and bulky enough for Cross's grip yet intricate enough to be impossible to unravel without the rope's own singular will. Years of use had hardened its contact, a reminder of its purpose—to protect and defend. With strength as solid as steel and weight so light it could beat lightning in a race, the rope seemed woven by fate itself.

The Raven's expansive wings masked the road ahead, casting a veil over what awaited them in the distance. Her wings were thick and soggy, clumping together in patches with a musty odor of molding dirt and matted grime. Underneath that scent lay hints of smoke from the fires in the sky and the ever-present stench of sulfur burning in the air.

Her wings en masse were tattered and bedraggled, more filamentous than plumaged, bare where some feathers had disappeared entirely, exposing her justacorps wrapped around her bony frame. The long cuts in her coat fit around her wings perfectly despite its amateurish design, allowing her wingspan to move easily.

Her feathers were snarled, gritty, and worn, the texture of sand against Cross's face. The hues were a feeble amalgam of dark blues and pitch blacks streaked with deep purples in the firelight.

In the past, those wings may have glimmered like a quilt of stars across the night sky, endowed with a creamy and luring texture like velvet, wobbling ever so faintly in the gale like a murmur. However, now they were foul, broken remnants in unsightly disarray.

The trio soon reunited with the mendacious crossroads and marched towards Paradise, their destinies tied to the east road. The red stones of the path shifted and crunched

beneath their feet as they weaved through the hardened landscape.

Then it presented itself—a river, thick with metallic crimson liquid, sluggishly plodding in defiance of time.

Gimlet recoiled, refusing to wade through it; her intricate horns froze mid-stroke, unmoved by the Raven's pleas to ferry them across, so Cross stepped in.

His gentle stroke of her horns and honeyed words seemed to captivate the cornurus as if awoken from a trance, and with a profound sigh of submission, she capitulated and reluctantly paddled them through the lukewarm blood until they reached the other side.

Cross glanced back at the swirling fluid and shuddered. The rich hue stained their already tattered garments. They made camp on the outskirts of Xibalbá, stripped off their soiled clothes, and scrubbed away as much sticky residue as possible with whatever clumps of weeds and dead grass were sticking between the rocks.

Cross's mistrust of the Raven had never been quenched, but he was wise enough to know when to yield and when to engage. He held no offensive arm to match her rope dart with and knew his chances in a brawl were slim; after all, she could have burned him in an instant if she'd chosen, yet so far, her rope dart had not struck him, indicating her need for his participation for another con to collect more divine chattel. So, Cross kept his guard up, vigilantly observing the Raven's every motion while feigning friendship with her.

As waking time surrendered to a new sleep cycle, the Raven soared close enough to the burning skies so as not to be incinerated, and with her arcane rope dart, she snared a plump barbot in mid-air.

Together, they drained the leathery bird's ichor and roasted its succulent meat over the flames. The aromatic

scent of roasting meat tickled Cross's nostrils, but he did not revel in its savory delight, for his nephesh was laden with suspicion as they sat by the crackling fire.

"How'd you domesticate a cornurus?" the Raven asked.

"I can tame any beast," Cross said. "First, you have to let them know who's boss. You're in control. Once they respect you, they let their guard down. Then you have to connect with them. Show them you understand them."

He caressed Gimlet's velvety snout as she lay in silent repose beside him, a reassuring reminder that her loyalty still lived within the solace of his nephesh and not with the sinister Raven.

"Give them the respect they gave you," he continued. "And sometimes it's just as simple as feeding them." He held a chunk of barbot meat up to Gimlet's wide mouth, and she fed. "They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Same for beasts."

Cross extended another delectable morsel of barbot meat to Gimlet. The cornurus's tongue slopped from her gaping maw, and she salivated with anticipation as she devoured it greedily. The sound of her gnashing teeth reverberated through the campfire.

Gimlet's hulking teeth clamped down on his hand, threatening to take a chunk out of him. The near-miss sent tremors of shock throughout his ruach, leaving him stunned by its viciousness.

Cross clouted her on the snout with the head of his fist before he could stop himself, and an uncomfortable shudder ran down his spine. He instantly regretted his brutishness. He knew her nip had been an accident; she would never harm him intentionally—but his primal urge to protect himself had overtaken him at that moment; it had been a reflex born out of too many years living in the

sinful shadows of the Underworld, where violence was a necessary survival mechanism. But that might've just been his excuse and justification. Apologies rose on his tongue but never found their way to freedom. Instead, he offered only insincere admonishment masked as consolation: "Never bite the hand that feeds you, got it, Gimlet?"

"Gimlet is an inspired name." The Raven dipped her slender arm into the depths of her burlap sack and withdrew a bushel of freshly picked calabash. She snapped one of the emerald bottle-shaped fruits off the cluster and lobbed it across to Cross.

He caught it with both hands. His eyes were transfixed on the velvety surface of the calabash. The silence enveloped them, interrupted only by the flames crackling in the sky.

"Fresh fruit is a very rare thing," the Raven said.

No matter what words came out of the Raven's mouth, her face remained expressionless, as if she maintained complete control over her emotions or was cursed with a permanent indifferent attitude toward everything. She obviously had her own goals but never appeared to smile or frown instinctively, like normal people. He recalled she never even showed anger towards him when he cursed her back in Metnal. And he had said some pretty vile things to get under her skin. But she seemed to choose what behaviors and emotions she expressed deliberately.

Not only did that quality make her the perfect swindler, but it also made it difficult for Cross to determine whether she knew the calabash was poison. If not, he could get her to drink from the fruit, and once the toxin put her down, he could steal all her divine chattel for himself. But if she knew the calabash was tainted, serving it to him could be her tricky way of determining if he knew about its venom, and

she might now be studying what he would do with it, testing his allegiance to her. He needed to turn the tables.

"It's no fun drinking alone." He raised his fruit in the air as a toast and waited for her to join him.

"What's the story behind naming her Gimlet?" the Raven said.

Cross couldn't help but chuckle as the memory of his past life flooded back to him as if it had only happened a moment ago. "I named her after a bawdy house gal I once knew when I was alive. Her stage name was the Roaring Gimlet. That's a fun story worth drinking to."

The Raven tucked the calabash back into her sack. "I'm not thirsty right now." She knotted the drawstrings closed.

"There's no such thing as not being thirsty," Cross said. "Your lips are as dry as mine. You think you're too good to drink with me or something?"

"You tend to get upset over small matters," she said. "Try to appreciate the small things in life and bask in that joy."

Cross lifted the smooth-skinned fruit with both hands and held it as if to savor its succulence. "Bolon-Hunahpu is still trying to get me to drink." He cast the calabash across the parched earth toward the Raven.

The Raven's ebony feathers rustled as she snatched the calabash from the parched soil. "I didn't have to keep the promise I made to him, but curiosity got the best of me." She discarded the produce back into her burlap sack alongside the other exotic objects.

5 - RIVER OF SCORPIONS

The intrepid trio continued their eastward journey for several miles, eventually coming to a repugnant river that bristled with life. Water did not flow through it; millions of scorpions swarmed in the murky depths, clambering over each other as they stung and slashed one another.

Undaunted, Gimlet plunged into the revolting river without hesitation while Cross and the Raven still rode on her back. The scorpions stung them as they went, biting deep and covering every inch of their flesh.

The Raven seized Cross by the arms; her wings worked vigorously to push them from the seething river of scorpions and propelled them out, narrowly evading a gruesome demise in the throes of the scorpions' poisonous fury.

Once on the other side of the river, they brushed themselves down, removing the clinging creatures squirming from their clothes while Gimlet reveled in the pandemonium of stinging and scurrying. Their pincers were too insignificant to puncture Gimlet's impervious exterior. She gamboled along the scorpion river, ravenously devouring the fleeing creatures with an abominable crunch as if it were a banquet presented in her honor.

Cross called out to Gimlet, yet she refused to retreat from her feast.

"If you eat too much," Cross said, "you'll get a tummy ache. I'll bring some so you can snack along the way."

Gimlet let out a throaty groan and dragged herself from the surging mass of writhing scorpions, dripping a dark, unearthly liquid that clung to her hide.

Cross carefully secured a few scorpions in a pouch for a few moments. The searing heat of their barbed stingers left his astral layers burning and swollen.

This served as his paltry attempt at repentance for hitting her. But this mercy offering was nothing compared to the grace Gimlet had given them—bearing two grown spirits with ease on her spiny back. She deserved more than a simple snack for her hard work, yet it remained all he could offer.

6 - DIVINE CHATTEL

The weary trio had trudged on for four sleep cycles before they arrived at the Viṇsaule canyons. Four pitch-black orbs hung low in the sky, like dead moons, heralding their entry into this land of no escape.

With a violent acid rain battering their tired bodies, Cross and the Raven took shelter in a shallow cave and built a smoldering fire.

As promised, Cross fed Gimlet the few leftover scorpions that remained. The cornurus scavenged through them, gobbling up the living ones before settling on the deceased.

The Raven unfurled her tattered burlap sack, unveiling a spindly spoon that glinted in the campfire. She clucked her tongue and raised it aloft, scrutinizing its every contour with a critical eye. Tapping it against an aged boulder, the Raven surveyed its potential for incantations. Finding no evidence of enchantment, she half-heartedly handed it to Cross.

"One for you," she said. Next, the Raven produced a handheld mirror. She peered into its depths, her eyes shifting over Cross's shoulder like someone had walked through the cavern's entrance.

Cross whirled in place, but all that met his gaze was the torrential acid rain beating against the cave walls outside.

"This one's for me," she said, setting the mirror aside.

Despite his trepidation at the potential horrors it could unleash, Cross couldn't help but wonder what the Raven saw in the mirror's reflection. Mirrors had long been a source of dread, for they reminded him of his mortality and provided access to frightening entities from beyond. Whenever a mirror caught his gaze, uncanny and terrifying visages from other realms would jeer at him with their menacing words. Cross had endured endless torment at their hands and endeavored to steer clear of all reflective surfaces. Whatever underworldly heka that mirror possessed would be of no benefit to him.

The Raven reached into the burlap sack and withdrew a bone comb. She ran the bristles through her jet-black locks. In an instant, under the spell of the enchanted comb, a section of her raven tresses transmogrified into a brilliant snowy mane.

"Nice look, Blondie," Cross said.

The Raven grasped a hank of her hair and held it to the firelight, weaving her silvery tresses together. She pulled the ethereal white strands through the bony teeth of her comb, and her locks shifted back to their natural matted ebony hue.

"Two for you," the Raven said, and with casual disregard, she flung the comb to Cross.

"You ain't gotta throw it at me," Cross said.

The Raven's unreadable expression masked her thoughts.

Cross picked up the comb from his lap. The arcane abilities vested within the Underworld's relics captivated him, yet he couldn't foresee a use for a comb that transformed

black hair to white. He ran his finger along the edge of his antique spoon, pondering its hidden potential. If it were truly valuable, he wouldn't let the Raven find out; she might take it from him.

Cross observed the Raven intently as she plucked two more items from her sack: a cigar lighter and a quilt. She unfurled the fabric on the craggy cave floor with a grand flourish, her dark eyes glinting with expectation at its presence. She gestured for Cross to sit beside her and partake in its meager comfort.

Cross nearly smiled at her courtesy, yet he knew that beneath her offer of comfort lay something far more significant—her hope of unlocking the quilts arcane secrets, not his own bodily pleasure. But in his chronic centuries-long fatigue, Cross had forgotten what it was like to feel something so soft and welcoming, and he eagerly complied with her request, almost too enticed.

As he seated himself upon its soft fibers, the Raven struck the lighter's flint, and from its depths, a host of minuscule, emblazoned salamanders erupted in a fantastic flickering display. One seared her hand, prompting her to drop the lighter onto the quilt.

Cross's laughter echoed through the cave as the conflagration of salamanders unraveled into the dark in gauzy threads.

The tiny infernos wafted across the breeze, dissipating in a flourish of smoke that floated towards the cave ceiling like wisps of candlelight petering out, meandering off to their own ethereal realm.

The Raven's hands glided across the quilt, her calloused fingers searching for the lighter she had dropped to its folds. But it had vanished as if devoured by some invisible menace within the quilts's depths.

"Well, that's two and three for me," the Raven said.

Object number six was a beaded necklace with a brass cross hanging from it. The Latin cross lacked any corpus and was unassuming in its appearance until the Raven held it up. An ominous glow bloomed from within, its brilliance soon illuminated their cave area and overshadowed the nearby campfire.

The Raven shuddered as if unnerved by the sight before chucking the adornment over to Cross. Its luminescence faded almost instantly when it landed in his hands.

"Three for you," the Raven said. "And sorry for throwing it. Old habit."

No trace of apology remained in the Raven's cold and unconcerned tone. Her sharp tongue tore into Cross with a mocking gibe, lamenting his request for the common courtesy of civility and promising him she would throw the remaining objects at him with unbridled violence, as she had done with all those that had preceded the Latin cross. There was no remorse, only the sneering defiance of one who has yielded their morality to the whims of their desires.

The Raven upended the burlap sack and poured the remaining articles onto the cave floor. With extreme caution, she ensured those items never landed on the dust-ridden quilt, for the supposed fear that they might get swallowed into its weave and vanish forever in magical oblivion.

Three objects tumbled, glinting in the campfire crackling beside them. A compass, an amphora, and a flask clattered on the cave floor as if to signal an imminent quest.

The Raven closed an eye, peered into the flask's opening, and inverted it as if trying to coax an elusive genie out. No liquid spilled out.

But even Cross could detect the potent aroma of bourbon rising out of the rim from his side of the quilt.

The Raven touched the rim of the flask to her nose and inhaled deeply. She took a small sip, letting the mystery liquid swirl around in her mouth as if savoring its complexity, before twisting the cap back on with a faint crack.

"What's in it?" Cross asked.

The Raven snubbed Cross's inquiry and picked up the compass from the musty cavern floor. The pointer of the instrument spun haphazardly, seeming unable or unwilling to determine the direction of the North.

Cross's hand jolted as a mysterious force pulled the spoon from his fingers, its arc changing to smack against the Raven's chest.

A vibrant green light crackled across her spirit for an instant and then vanished almost as soon as it had appeared.

Had Cross blinked, he would have missed the spectacle. His nape bristled as the Raven's inky tresses also rose upright on her scalp of their own accord.

An icy dread lingered in the air like a storm was about to ensue. Cross shuddered in awe as the surrounding atmosphere changed with unknown energy, demonstrating a force beyond his wildest comprehension. How much power had the Raven unlocked? The object piqued his curiosity. Their discovery of the mysterious compass set the ball rolling on something far more significant than Cross could ever have imagined.

The lifeless spoon still clung stubbornly to her breast, affixed by the unseen magic.

"That's mine." Cross reached for his spoon, and although he had not meant to, his palm graced the Raven's supple breast.

He had not been intimate with a woman since Diamond Tooth, and the warmth and bliss that rushed through him at that moment reminded him of the delights of females' fragile figures. Even the tough-as-nails Raven was still tender to the touch. For a brief spell, he savored the sensation that had been absent for years.

A sliver of frigid steel glided beneath Cross's chin, jerking him from his spellbound stupor.

The Raven's rope dart slithered to his jugular like a snake and coiled around his throat.

Cross relinquished his hold on the Raven's chest and raised his hands in surrender. "I didn't mean—I was just—"

The Raven's rope dart dug deep into the flesh of his throat, making his chin strain towards the heavens before freeing him. Its menace still hung in the air, a chill that lingered even after the rope had slipped away.

The Raven let the compass slip from her grasp, clinking against her sack's many treasures. As she did so, the spoon, no longer connected to her by the invisible tether, dropped into her lap. She tossed it aside, spinning it into a faraway corner of darkness.

"Fetch," The Raven said. The word sliced through the atmosphere, as sharp and unforgiving as the obsidian edges of a macuahuitl. Its intended target was the illusion of peace they had so painstakingly constructed over the past several sleep cycles. The ferocity of her gaze and the wintry indifference within her eyes were enough to make any man quake in fear. She stared on, expressionless and uncaring, her face an unbearably still mask. The surrounding air was thick with dread, and he dared not speak or move for fear of unleashing the sheer terror that emanated from the Raven.

Cross rose from the quilt, his nephesh racing as he

searched for his stupid spoon, his fingers blindly probing the grotto's blackness.

A charred wraith splintered in his grasp, shocking him at its sudden, unexpected appearance.

He stumbled backward, trembling as he collided with the unforgiving earth, and his breath caught in his throat.

"What is it?" the Raven asked.

Her bewitched rope dart reared its head back, poised to unleash its lethal strike.

"Nothing," Cross said. "A blighted spirit. Just a blight."

Despite the well-known fact that every spirit burned to a crust when it succumbed to a second death, there was no universally accepted nomenclature for this spiritual transmogrification. These beings were labeled in myriad terms: the departed, the listless, the vacant, nothings, endlings—so many colloquial names.

Cross simply referred to them as some variation of blighted spirit, or blights for short, because that's what his old friend Diamond Tooth used to call them. Her authority made the term sound more accurate than the others. And because of his involvement with her, Cross strived to avoid being around blights and refused to touch them for fear of being inflicted with some ill-fated curse.

They were once vibrant, walking, and talking spirits like Cross. But now, they littered the Underworld as hollow ruachs, existing only in the reflexive Mind, Will, and Emotion of their insentient nephesh.

Cobwebs of charcoal-colored muck coiled around their bony frames, like a spider's attempt to bestow a new fleshly form upon them. Even the slightest touch of a stick could shatter their mangled exterior shells into fine ash and dust, leaving their insides oozing onto the ground like dark molasses until nothing but dust remained.

Cross spied his spoon, its polished face glittering deep in the heart of the hellish black powdery chippings of the wretched blight. He held a hand to his mouth and nose as he savagely crushed the horrific blight under his boot. He hastily retrieved his spoon from within the ash before him.

Tiny white specks flew out of the scoop and were scattered along the ground. Many of these delicate white grains were sprinkled about the soot of the blight.

He squatted down to inspect them and soon realized with awe that these little white tidbits were not average snowflakes but grains of rice!

His eyes widened as he scouted the terrain for other rice granules, yet he only encountered them within the blight's malodorous bowels, where his spoon had once lain. Then, a seedling of faith germinated in Cross's mind—could it be the miraculous power of his spoon?

Cross slowly revolved, checking on the Raven as she upturned the amphora, scrutinizing its underside.

Taking advantage of the opportunity of a distracted Raven, Cross shrewdly stirred the spoon in the blight's loathsome innards.

As he had suspected, the spoon miraculously summoned uncooked grains from the desiccated remains.

He pinched a grain between his weary fingertips and blew the ashy flakes off its surface. He paused, crossing himself as he raised it to his lips. But then he thought better of it and hesitated.

Such a gift was too good to be true. The rice could be tainted. He should test it on another spirit first—but who? Surely not Gimlet; that thought was beyond unthinkable. And the Raven would be too wary of the rice to dare test it for poison. Cross could never persuade her to taste it, so he resolved to hold on to the secret until a

more opportune moment to sprinkle the grains into her meal secretly.

He scattered the suspicious granules into the darkness with a sweep of his hand.

A thunderous, undulating roar filled the cavern, rippling through the atmosphere like a titanic wave crashing against a barren coastline.

Gimlet gave a strangled gasp, and Cross whirled with lethal grace, his hand hovering above his macuahuitl, prepared to deliver a fatal blow.

A mighty geyser erupted from the Raven's amphora, cascading across the cavernous ceiling. In a mere second, the tumult ceased, and the Raven stood drenched, her thin blouse conforming to her figure with striking clarity. Her blouse clung to her generous curves, her sable nipples starkly visible beneath the soaked fabric.

Cross tore his eyes away from The Raven's chest and peered up at the cascading droplets of water that clung to the jagged stalactites of the cave.

In a moment of miraculous awe, he beheld as petals of deep sapphire and lustrous violet unfurled from the ceiling, lighting the cave walls like a thousand stars. Then swathes of flourishing vegetation sprung from the puddles of water below, painting the empty cavern with a spectrum of verdant hues and transforming it into an ethereal paradise.

The Raven crouched and plucked a delicate flower from the fresh cave garden. She brought it up to her nose and inhaled, her eyes fluttering shut in ecstasy. "Ankhami," she said reverently before twirling the stem between her nimble fingers.

"That's four, five, and six for me," she said, and with swift precision, she tossed the handful of objects into the intricately woven quilt that lay on the ground beside her.

Without fail, they vanished as soon as they hit its folds. Finally, she rolled up the quilt and crammed it into the rough burlap sack.

The Raven hoarded all the most coveted objects for herself, leaving Cross with a single item of interest to him: the Latin cross, not simply for its shimmering illumination but for what it signified. It brought solace to his spirit and reminded him of his ultimate reward in the bliss of Paradise. One day, all of his sufferings would be extinguished, so he hung the Latin cross around his neck, though the spoon could be helpful if it produced dregs lethal enough to dispatch the Raven. But what if it produced actual grain? He pondered, with apprehension and morbid curiosity, the depths of immorality he would have to descend to indulge in a meal of rice made from the charred spirits of disgusting blights. For now, however, he could sustain himself on meager barbot rations. Last and least, his bone comb proved utterly pointless.

"That's it?" Cross said.

"That's it," the Raven said.

"What the hell am I gonna do with this spoon and comb?"

"I'll take them off your hands." The Raven held out her pallid hand, the pale ivory of her slender wrist broken by an ebony leather cuff. Her digits were elongated and hardened, their tips worn and scarred with years of labor. Her obsidian eyes burned through him with unspoken weight, awaiting a response. She could influence the very fabric of this world with a single gesture. Such was the strength of her will.

Cross reluctantly shoved the spoon and comb deep into his pockets with a tight, disdainful scowl, feeling the weight of the Underworld at that moment.

"Congratulations," the Raven said. "You're now worth thirteen objects." The Raven proffered Cross a draught from the phantom flask.

Cross accepted it and imbibed liquid that materialized at his lips while the vessel remained inscrutably bare.

The ambrosial lick of Peacock whiskey, his beloved brand of bourbon, caressed his tongue and cascaded harmoniously down his gullet. It tasted even purer than he had remembered.

And with that shared swig, Cross knew the Raven had roped him in to be her partner—albeit an asymmetrical one, but a partner nonetheless. It was far better than her burning him to second death.

Cross reverently grasped the Latin cross adorning his chest, symbolizing strength in his quest. A newfound conviction welled up within him. He would somehow succeed in either robbing the Raven of all her divine chattel or at least persuading her to split them equally with him, particularly those items that would be most powerful.

"My neck is on the line," he said. "Next time, I want more objects. More than half."

"You may deserve more," the Raven said, "but when a job isn't worth my while economically, I spend my down-time seeking other employment opportunities. Sometimes, that hunt interferes with the timing of my current job. And despite your pretty little neck being on the line, I might not be in such a hurry to stop your execution. Who knows if I'll even show up? Maybe something better will come along."

"Well, if you're late," he said, "you're better off not even showing up. No one crosses me. Those who do learn why they call me Cross. Eventually, they all get nailed."

"Very creative," the Raven said, appearing unfazed by his threat.

The two of them would be a more effective force if they combined their efforts against their enemies than if each of them fought solo, but friendship was out of the question because they could never come to trust each other as they both would always keep their guard up around the other. It was in Cross's best interests to endure and go along with the arrangement for the foreseeable future so he could seize as many divine chattel as possible.

"Where to next?" he asked.

CHAPTER 8
PARADISE LOST

1 - THE FERRYMAN

Divine light assailed Diamond Tooth from all directions, its brilliance emanating from nowhere and everywhere, washing all it touched on its side of the A'raf with pervasive and offensive love. With the lumenite no longer protecting her ruach, the warmth of the light bruised her astral surface and smothered her breathing.

She screened her eyes with a quivering hand as she trudged through the roads and trails, squinting against the shimmering grasses and trees. Her eyes dried out, the lids threatening to tear with each blink.

She dropped to her knees by a nearby pond and submerged her face in fresh water. But the water did not relieve her suffering. It steamed and sizzled around her eyes while an infernal itch set in. The harder she scratched, the more her vision became distorted.

Fueled by a yearning for freedom, she pushed onward

with feverish intensity. Soon enough, the thick aroma of salt told her she had reached the world's edge.

The white void stretched before her, dotted with a distant cluster of islands. Her destination, the isle of Mag Mell, floated in the formidable expanse of nothingness in a dreamlike state while Jannah sparkled in serene waters. Between them, the islands of Aaru sat in two parts—half in water and half in the white void, cleaved down the middle by Anima Falls, where the entirety of Oceanus roared into the everlasting blankness.

Radiant light cascaded out from the abyss, its intensity too mighty for Diamond Tooth to look upon. Her eyelids burned and quivered in agony. It was never meant for demons such as her. The light branded itself into her vision, never to be forgotten.

The inky fabric of an ankou's robe billowed in the breeze, a shadow standing against the brilliant light. It appeared before her as if it had been rooted to the spot since the dawn of time until it willingly revealed itself, much like an apparition materializing from a dream.

A ferry emerged above Diamond Tooth, just as ominous and mysterious; the two seemed connected by some invisible force. And its four pallid horses snorted and stamped at their tethers, churning up a ghostly mist of shimmering sand as if eager to cross over and transport their spectral master to the islands beyond.

Diamond Tooth approached the menacing ankou, dreading the thought of what her fate might be.

The top of its pointed hood rose way over her head, its robes concealing whatever spirit dwelt within from sight or touch, the hood casting a dark shadow over its hidden visage.

Diamond Tooth yearned for the solace that the ghoulish

cloak would bring if she enveloped herself in it as a safeguard against the piercing light.

But the cloak pulsed with a life of its own, entwined with the ankou in a seamless unity. Nothing could have sundered them.

She could never tear it away from its bearer. The cloak would only reject her and return to its master. If she dared to even reach out for it, the bagh nakhs she wielded could not harm an ankou—each one was armed with a scythe capable of annihilating any spirit with just one dreadful stroke. Any attempt to seize the cloak would be fruitless. Despite all her craftiness and courage, Diamond Tooth could not prevail in a fight against such power—she was no fool.

Besides, only the ankou could ferry her to the distant islands across the great white abyss. A select few spirits were ever granted the privilege to traverse between the Underworld and Paradise with impunity, such as the mysterious ankou. Tales became rife that these ferrymen had even greater autonomy, being able to venture beyond those realms, tasked to escort the recently deceased to their ultimate resting place.

And payment for this ride aboard the ankou's boat was lumenite, yet all that remained of Diamond Tooth's lumenite was a pouch full of dust.

Undeterred, she poured the powdery remnants into her hand with a determined trembling, knowing she had little choice but to present them and hope for passage.

"It's slightly worse for wear," Diamond Tooth said. "But it's all there. Every grain."

The bony fingers of the ankou stretched from its dark, billowing robe and hovered over Diamond Tooth's trembling palm.

The lumenite powder twirled and churned like a tiny, sparkling tempest in her hand. Against all expectations, the particles coalesced into a single glowing stone that filled the air with an angelic hum.

In awe, Diamond Tooth watched as the ankou restored the lumenite's life; it solidified and glowed with heavenly radiance.

But before she could revel in its return to her grasp, the luminous stone shot into the ankou's skeletal hand with an unnerving swiftness. As the bones receded into its shadowy vestments, the lumenite's ethereal hum ceased, and its light disappeared into the gloomy abyss of the ankou's sleeve.

"I need that!" Diamond Tooth clenched her fists.

The ankou, emanating a calm air of serenity, extended an arm towards the ferry.

The expansive vessel that had soared above them only moments before shifted its form. It shrank into a single-occupant craft operated by a single figure in the blink of an eye. Its four pale horses transformed into a single spectral steed, whose shadowy outline stirred the sands with underworldly grace.

Diamond Tooth's muscles unclenched, the tightness slipping from them like a sigh released into the dark. Her fingers uncoiled with an almost geologic reluctance as if passaging time had set each one in place. The frustration and rage rising within her burned like a forge's fire, yet it was wisdom to gather her composure and follow the ankou.

"You never impounded the lumenite before," Diamond Tooth said. "Will you return it?"

"In or out." The ankou's voice reverberated into the void like a blade. Its timbre shook her to her core with a finality

that seemed to have been carved into the very fabric of time itself. Its words radiated an eternal coldness and a monumental weight of unmistakable consequence that anchored her in place, depriving her of other options. It was far beyond a mere choice between Paradise and the Underworld; this was whether she would take the ultimate risk and venture into the realm of the living for survival. To feed off the living rather than being confined in the Underworld, where she could barely subsist on the damned. There was only one chance for her to break free.

Unlike demons such as Diamond Tooth, ankou answered to no one. They served as arbiters of fate and defenders of the hapless and downtrodden against lofty deities like the Master, Selladore, Anu, or Magna Mater, who viewed the damned as unfeeling instruments for their entertainment. Such was why the Underworld remained in an everlasting state of chaos until a schism occurred among those condemned to it.

Diamond Tooth's resolve intensified, and she walked towards the boat, knowing this was her only hope for preservation.

The vessel floated inches above the sand. And it seemed to sense that Diamond Tooth, an entity of darkness, could not bear the illumination of Paradise. Thus, it created a canopy to shield her from the scathing radiance of the glaring chasm.

She cowered beneath its shade, encasing herself in her arms and burying her head into her lap to conceal her eyes from the devilish rays as they journeyed to the levitating utopias that awaited them.

2 - MAG MELL

The ankou ferry touched down at the majestic isle of Mag Mell.

Diamond Tooth spilled out of the boat, heedless of her surroundings, trampling over the magenta flora and verdant glades that populated the soil.

From across the chasm, the island's silhouette appeared mundane in size, but everything changed upon setting foot on its soil. The island grew in both size and grandeur before her eyes. An enchanting spell had perhaps been cast; for now, it loomed over the abyss like an entirely new realm, swallowing the horizon on all sides as if it would expand to placate the prodigious egos and vacuous eminence of the judgmental, sanctimonious, and frankly… just obnoxious spirits who dwelled there.

The air carried the fragrant scent of flowers with a hint of hedonism, and its balmy touches were a cruel reminder of a different world that was vibrant and aglow with life. It wafted into Diamond Tooth's nose, carrying traces of nauseating freshness, absent of the rot and death she enjoyed in the Underworld.

The acrid miasma of the Underworld was a crisp and melodious lullaby of chimes that swept away benevolence to fill Diamond Tooth with the rancor and fortitude to persevere despite the odds, while the invigorating atmosphere of Paradise was instead a searing inferno as if each gasp was accompanied by blazing coals piercing her ruach. It scorched her lungs. And the blessed water was toxic for all demonic consumption—holy water burned demons to second death. Paradise was the true Hell, Diamond Tooth's waking nightmare.

Diamond Tooth raced through meadows of wildflowers, flourishing gardens, and untouched woodlands.

Pure spirits frolicked about unclothed with an attitude as though concealing their flesh were a sin.

It was agonizing to behold. Not that the people were naked. She was no prude. Outside the boundaries of Paradise, she was young and fairest among haggard beasts, wretched souls, and malformed monstrosities. But each soul in Paradise appeared more youthful than her, more comely than her, and more vivacious than her. Not one gray hair or wrinkle befell any of them; no fat marred their limber frames. Men boasted brawny chests and sculpted torsos, while women flaunted luscious breasts and voluptuous curves. Compared to them, Diamond Tooth felt like a withered old crone.

Harmonious music and revelry clawed at Diamond Tooth's senses. It pounded at her temples, and her forehead ached.

Even the white rabbits danced in sync with the thumping drums, wailing flutes, and, the most unbearable among them, the plucked strings of a harp.

Diamond Tooth envisioned herself snatching those cords and choking the hapless musician. No one would've noticed.

In fact, the people were all so preoccupied with frolicking and devoting their bodies to one another that they were blissfully unaware that Diamond Tooth—a demon—walked among them.

And this caused Diamond Tooth more distress than the constant pain caused by the hazardous environmental conditions. She could handle pain and suffering, but no one ever disregarded her.

But their obliviousness went deeper than just over-

looking her. In the same way the brilliance of Paradise shrouded her vision, the sheer bliss of the inhabitants of Paradise prevented them from viewing the wickedness creeping right past them. The righteous ostracized demons with such intensity that they could not see her; their glances slid past her, around her, and through her as if she were invisible.

It irritated Diamond Tooth, for no one ever ignored her. For an instant, she even wished one of them would recognize her mere existence before she withered away to nothing.

But Diamond Tooth's unrest over her isolation dissipated when she reached her employer's treehouse among the sprawling forest.

The titanic tree dominated the landscape with its imposing might, stretching up like a relentless monolith into the white void. Its trunk was vast, and its boughs extended out, forming an immaculate canopy that ascended towards the abyss and crowned its share of the island with an emerald diadem and a despicable halo.

Rowings's palace nestled amid the tree branches, constructed with solid flamboyance and pretentiousness.

The expansive structure was a repulsive vision of vibrant colors, golden walls embellished with intricate carvings, and dazzling emerald gems encrusted in their silky façade. Grand balconies and terraces jutted out to kiss the horizon, while intricately carved marble columns and stairs of opulent statues led to the upper levels of the lofty abode. The tall and arched windows sparkled like stars under illumination, reflecting the cordial beaming of the divine light. The mansion melted into the tree, its branches curling around it like fingers strangling a throat. And each self-important member of the righteous owned

an indulgent mansion of a similar overcompensating proportion.

The doors to the dwelling were ajar, beckoning all who passed by them with warmth and welcome.

Yet Diamond Tooth was perhaps the only being to frequent the doorstep of Rowings's lonesome abode, doing so out of necessity rather than compassion. But even her presence couldn't stave off his abandonment issues, only adding fuel to his estrangement. This very sorrow drew her in and ignited a spark within.

Rowings lay stretched out on the bed, enveloped in an uneasy slumber. Balding hair reached from his temples to meet his scraggly beard. His Tribulation uniform lay tossed over the chair at his bedside, the hat resting atop it.

Diamond Tooth stood at his bedside for a few moments, watching the rhythm of his breathing and witnessing each violent cough that broke the serenity of his sleep.

Rowings had become yet another victim of spiritual warfare, his ruach scarred and burning to an agonizingly slow second death that could stretch into eternity if he was so unlucky.

And Diamond Tooth derived a perverse delight in his suffering and powerlessness. The irony was not lost on her: Rowings lived in a land without illness or affliction, yet he remained a prisoner in his own bed, withdrawn from company and struck with malaise, preventing him from venturing into his beloved utopia.

Diamond Tooth's vision slowly sharpened. Moisture lubricated her withered throat, and she could breathe without the air burning her lungs.

Rowing stirred to consciousness and set his gaze upon Diamond Tooth. He gasped and hurled himself backward within the confines of his bed, shielding himself against her

presence. Then he sighed with deep contentment, reclining against his thick velvet pillow. "Ah! Diamond Tooth … How delightful to see you, although you don't look very well."

"You should look in the mirror," Diamond Tooth said.

"Did you shut the door?" Rowings's voice trembled as he sought solace beneath the layers of blankets. "They cannot see me like this. Not yet."

"You left it open."

"Can you shut it, please?"

"I did," she lied.

"Excellent," he said, beaming, loosening his grasp of the quilts. "I take it your appearance here means you have the information?"

Diamond Tooth yanked at her constricting collar. Her fingers trembled as she undid the clasp, gasping for a trace of the Underworld's noxious fumes. She tried to moisten her cracked lips with a swipe of her tongue but only drew her stony tongue around and around the dry terrain of her palate.

She had to finish the task hastily and depart from Paradise with alacrity.

"Tivoli is using the name Clem Balfour," Diamond Tooth said.

Rowings reached beneath the mattress, the sheets rustling as he yanked forth a rough burlap sack with deep satisfaction. "You have done a great deed," Rowings said, his voice laden with admiration and his eyes shimmering in magical light. "Good for three divine chattel."

Diamond Tooth lunged for the burlap sack, her eyes settling on a gleaming band adorning Rowing's withering digit.

In an instant, Rowings clamped down on his hand and swept away the bundle of items beyond Diamond Tooth's

reach. A shard of Rowings's grin remained, though a frenzied expression pushed it from its mirthful glory. His voice velvety yet taut, he said, "Anything else from Carson?"

Diamond massaged the back of her stiff neck. Tension radiated from every part of her ruach.

"He alluded to a gate," she whispered, her voice hoarse and raspy.

"Yes, yes. The Torana. Did he indicate its whereabouts?"

Diamond Tooth shook her head and grimaced, her pounding temples threatening to send her into an abyss of unbearable pain.

Rowings slammed his soft mattress; his rage was evident in the booming sound. He sighed and fell back onto his luxurious bed. "I warned you he would deceive us. He only wants it for himself. I expected this. That's why I sent you—you demons are adept at administering such undertakings."

"No worries," Diamond Tooth said. "He'll never speak to anyone from now on."

Rowings's lips pursed, and he heaved himself off the pillow. "What have you done?" His voice was heavy and revealed the anger beneath his tightly controlled exterior.

Diamond Tooth faked a trembling timbre in her voice. "My sincerest apologies, sir. I had understood your desire for revenge for the injustice he did to you. And like any true professional, I ensured those lusts would be fulfilled. I realize now that I may have been overzealous in my retribution against your adversary. But your message has been delivered. As always, you get what you pay for."

Rowings's hands clenched around the linen comforter, his piercing gaze fixed on the distant foot of the bed.

"If it's any consolation," Diamond Tooth said. "Carson was telling the truth. I know when someone's lying to me.

Liars secrete a specific odor. They don't smell good or bad. They just don't smell right. And Carson sort of implied that Tivoli knows where to look for your Torana. He even gave me a key."

"Give it to me!" A searing heat of fixation and frantic dedication blazed in Rowings's voice.

For a man as joyful as Rowings had portrayed himself, it was inconceivable why he had been so desperate to depart Paradise. Perhaps his former misdeeds had converged with the grim prospects ahead of him. Or maybe he had become cognizant of what Diamond Tooth knew all too well: that Paradise was an illusion.

Diamond Tooth hoisted the astrolabe from within her blouse, unclasping its golden chain from around her throat.

The heavy object felt like an old lover from bygone days, long deceased but suddenly alive again, as she presented it to Rowings's awaiting palms with solemn reverence.

"Ah, the astrolabe!" Rowings's eyes widened in disbelief. His hands trembled as he reached out to cradle the relic in his palms, eager to embrace it like a long-lost love.

The golden ring on his finger glinted in the divine light, daring Diamond Tooth to discover how it had come into his possession.

"What manner of fool would have offered you something so rare and precious?" Rowings said.

"Maybe Carson thought I'd burn you, find Tivoli, and then depart the Underworld forever."

Rowings roared with mirth, his booming voice echoing against the walls of the cavernous mansion.

Diamond Tooth joined in the jubilance; each lost in their joyous serenade. But while Rowings was reveling in amusement, her laughter had a more sinister undertone. Rowings should've asked why she had willingly relin-

quished possession of such a powerful and valuable trinket —the astrolabe—to him instead of keeping it for herself.

Before long, they trailed off simultaneously, the truth behind their laughter becoming clear.

"Carson was right," Diamond Tooth said.

Rowings' face was a mask of terror as he thrashed against the bedsheets, recoiling from Diamond Tooth. He resembled a cowering creature poised to flee from mortal peril. The air was thick with sweat, and alarm wafted around, electrified by the galvanic charge of adrenaline coursing through his trembling frame.

"I'm already burning," Rowings said. "You'd just be putting me out of my misery."

"You and me both." Diamond Tooth pointed her bagh nakhs at Rowings.

Sish. Seven blades launched from her gauntlets and sliced into Rowings's ruach.

Rowings gasped for air as a rasping second death rattle emerged from his lips.

"Don't talk," Diamond Tooth said. "You'll burn faster. And I can't have that. I have to make it out of here."

Diamond Tooth basked in the delicious stench of Rowings's agonies, the nectar of his distress. Her salivary glands activated, and her eyes ceased to itch as she drew languid, sultry breaths.

She pried the astrolabe from his grip, nestled it against her bosom, and tucked it within her garment. Next, she yanked off the ring from his finger, shoved it into her pocket, and slung the burlap sack with the three objects over her shoulder.

Now only she and Balfour were aware of the Torana's existence. After Balfour told her where to find it, she'd burn him too; the Torana would then be hers alone.

Before departing, she lingered, reveling in Rowings's emotional anguish one last time. She was uncertain whether his offering would keep her vitality aloft until she could break free from Paradise, but it was preferable to having nothing.

Rowings's mouth spasmed as the final flutter of afterlife ebbed through him.

But Diamond Tooth would not be satisfied until every drop of his misery nourished her unspeakable hunger. She greedily drank in every wisp of his evaporating ruach until it burned, leaving only a scorched and sullied memory on the once-pristine bed sheets.

Then a mysterious flicker of afterlife, like kindling that had lit up in a murky abyss, beckoned her to take note.

Eerie web-like fibers unfurled from Rowings's burned husk in an alarming and sickening display. Hundreds snaked across the bedsheets, weaving into the headboard. The phantasmal threads entwined around his ashes and tugged at his frail form towards the far side of the chamber as if they were a legion of spectral hands.

Diamond Tooth recoiled, pressing her back against the wall as she gaped at the inky tendrils engulfing the room. Her mind contested between curiosity and horror; an unknown force was manifesting before her like some bewitching specter from another realm.

The black fibers moved with purposeful grace, as if controlled by some unseen force. The sinister entity unfurled with indomitable ferocity, enveloping the entire chamber and devouring every corner of the mansion. They diverted around the edges of each beam of light, like ships skirting the jagged rocks of a barren shoreline. The midnight strands slithered through the crevices in the

marble floors as though following a map that only they could decipher.

Burned spirits had never acted in such a display of power before. Ordinarily, second death claimed the damned without fanfare—with a mere puff of smoke and an absence of presence. What she had just witnessed was unprecedented and nothing short of spectacular. It brimmed with unfathomable power and left her feeling humbled and awestruck. But what made Rowings so deserving of such extraordinary power?

A tremor rumbled throughout the mansion.

The seismic quake hurled Diamond Tooth off the ground. She crashed onto the hard floor with a sickening thud. The place shook too violently for her to stand.

Diamond Tooth crawled to the main entrance, rolled out of the tottering mansion, and found solid footing. She clambered down the curved stairway carved into the massive trunk. Each beat of her boots against the ancient stone staircase thumped through the solid trunk like a thunderbolt. She raced with the wind as if it carried her in its grasp, leaving dust trails and fading crackle noises in her wake.

She never looked back until she arrived at the base of the towering tree.

The liquescent strands seeped from Rowings's abode, nestled deep in the canopy. The once-mighty tree leaned precariously as if a single gust would topple it into the island, bringing down the entire forest and every other mansion.

Several ankou soared up to Carson's treehouse mansion in their boats. The air filled with the beating of their billowing robes, fanning around them like black clouds.

The sickly black tendrils weaved through branches and down the ancient tree's trunk.

Undaunted, the Ankous brandished their scythes and joined forces against the dark power, hacking and slashing at an agile speed that had little effect on the oppressive infection.

The fibers remained unaffected, clinging to the wood as if rooted there, smothering it in inky strands that stretched across other mansions and reached the forest floor.

Diamond Tooth lingered, transfixed by an internal tug-of-war. She desired to remain and watch the ankous fight off the ensorcelled tendrils, yet instinct warned against it; her astral surface now searing from the divine light's radiation, and she worried that if she remained, they would soon uncover her as the source of the dark blight that now beset the mansion. She wouldn't allow herself to linger, for deep down, Diamond Tooth knew whatever future awaited her beyond this veil was far better than any outcome here. Taking advantage of their momentary distraction, Diamond Tooth slinked away unnoticed.

The moment Diamond Tooth spun about to flee, an ankou materialized.

Its billowing black cloak twined around the ankou's form, thrumming with vitality. The ankou loomed high above her head, and its hood shrouded the spectral presence in an endless shadow, hiding the ancient spirit within its depths.

"Things which hath been without motion for millions of years hath come into life through thee." The ankou's tone carried an ancient power that rumbled deep into her consciousness like a colossal wave of ice. Its declaration persisted as an ominous warning, heavy with finality and

despair, attaining a ringing quality as it resounded with certainty.

The atmosphere constricted as if invisible forces were compressing it, bearing down upon Diamond Tooth's shoulders as if to restrain her.

Fear and expectation laced together in an invisible, acrid scent that Diamond Tooth had smelled many times before when she had been the instigator of terror in others. But now, the foul aroma of fright emanated from her ruach.

Diamond Tooth felt rooted to the spot and sensed the energy of the ankou pervading her ruach like a palpable presence. Her muscles coiled and tensed, ready to act on impulse at any moment.

A scythe materialized beneath the Aankou's voluminous shroud, its gradual arc culminating in a behemoth blade at one end of the lengthy staff.

"Hail, mine scythe," the ankou said, "which advanceth and beateth down opposition. I am stronger thereby than the strong, and I have more power thereby than the mighty."

Diamond Tooth balled her fists, readying to discharge her bagh nakhs, though she knew she could not vanquish the ankou. Still, she planned to go down fighting.

The ankou slowly hoisted the scythe aloft and aimed it straight towards the void that would have been home to Diamond Tooth's nephesh had she been born a mortal soul instead of a demon.

Sish. Diamond Tooth unleashed her bagh nakhs, discharging a flurry of sharpened metal daggers toward the ankou. They sliced through the air and met their target with deadly precision.

But as they flew, the ankou's cloak of darkest midnight

opened up, swallowing each dagger into its depths like a voracious beast.

"No evil thing of any kind whatsoever shall be done unto me," the ankou said. "I shalt not have the festivals of demons celebrated on me in evil fashion. Thereby, thy knives shall be swallowed up. I shalt not then be gored. Cruel gashes with knives shall not be inflicted upon me. Violence shall not be done unto me, and I shalt not be destroyed. I, the ankou, death incarnate, the assessor of the holy offerings of all the gods, whose word is truth, and the lord of fealty to none."

Diamond Tooth stood before her adversary with no weapons to fight back. The realization hit her hard—powerlessness seeped into her ruach like molten lava. There was no escape from this dreadful fate. Heka, beyond her understanding, was at play here, and she could not fight against its forces alone.

But she refused to give up now; failure was not an option. With gritted teeth and determination in her spirit, Diamond Tooth took a step forward, ready to face whatever came next.

The ankou's sentient shroud swirled around the spirit once more before a brilliant orb of light shot forth from the scythe.

It burst into Diamond Tooth's chest with unerring accuracy, and she crumpled to the grass in agony.

Her fingers dug into her chest as if trying to rip open her flesh and pluck the burning ember away.

She assumed her last moment had come, yet remarkably, she found no evidence of damage or bleeding—the orb had seamlessly meshed with her ruach without leaving a single sign of entry.

"What did you do?" Diamond Tooth said.

"I hath returned thy lumenite," the ankou said.

Although the ankou's billowing robe cast a veil over its face, Diamond Tooth could sense the sinister glee emanating from it.

A wave of ice-cold terror cascaded down her trembling ruach as if the heavens had descended upon her, ominously foreshadowing some unnamed malevolence.

The lumenite never belonged to her. Rowings had gifted it to her after he had pillaged it from one of the just during a random conflict in the wars. The lumenite should not have adorned her ruach. She could not fathom the impact it would have on her.

She laid a hand on her breast and sensed the lumenite fill the hollowness within, pulsing like an independent organ and resonating with every beat against her ruach like a nephesh. It felt alien and wrong.

"What's it going to do to me?" Diamond Tooth asked.

"Let thy be carried away in mine boat," the ankou said, "or be seized violently. I shalt return thee to the West. Never thy shall again be taken to the East to have festivals of the just celebrated on thee."

The ankou's arm rose hauntingly, its bony finger extending with sinister intent toward the ferry, tethered serenely at the bay's harbor. Its spectral form hovered above the white void like a portent of doom cast upon a lone vessel on a bleak night.

CHAPTER 9
IN BEDLAM WITH THE ENEMY

I - LECHERY

Cross bided his time during his sojourn with the Raven in the echoing Viņsaule canyons through an interminable sequence of sleep cycles. The waking periods slipped quietly through his fingers, like sand in an hourglass. Yet he had grown accustomed to the Raven's presence.

The Raven might have been a reluctant conversationalist, but her company was not so unbearable. She had been nothing like the terrifying creature that the extraordinary tales about her had depicted. The woman Cross beheld was nothing more than perceptive and crafty, disproving all accounts of her being primitive and monstrous. Yet that fact only made her even more threatening.

So, he waited with patience and vigilance for his moment to act, never shifting his contemplation from the ragged burlap sack that bagged all the divine chattel, but it never left the Raven's side.

Now and again, throughout several sleep cycles, the

Raven would don her justacorps and soar away from their cave, always carrying along that bag of divine chattel.

Whenever she was away, Cross foraged the canyons in search of blighted spirits to use his mystic spoon to transmogrify their grievous remains into rice, but alas, he could not uncover any and hence could not conceal the grain within the Raven's food to determine if it was poisonous or not.

The horizon blazed into a crescendo of orange and pink whenever the Raven returned from her frequent travels. Her justacorps billowed after her in her graceful descent towards their cave.

Cross stood in awe of her flight as the swathe of inky feathers cleaved through the burning sky like an ankou's scythe, reaping the souls of the departed.

No spirit could withstand the rippling lake of fire that was the Underworld's blazing sky except barbots. They seemed to be the only creatures able to traverse within it without combusting into a blighted spirit or suffering annihilation. While there was no known explanation for this phenomenon, conjecture abounded that since these gentle birds were bred in the Underworld, they had never experienced a first death and, thus, could evade a second death. Some even speculated that the Master of the Underworld or even the Underworld itself had decreed that barbots would never die a second death and succumb to a fate of vacancy like the damned.

Cross was uncertain if the Raven was a fallen or demoted angel, but one thing he knew for sure was that she was equally damned as him. That rendered her as vulnerable to the inferno in the heavens as any other spirit. Still, she flew closer to the fires than any other spirit would dare, as though she had a second death wish. Cross observed her

skimming near enough to the blaze, carefully twisting and turning in a graceful dance as she deftly evaded being immolated. She made it appear effortless, a supernatural feat of agility and grace.

She carelessly flung the coarse jute bag onto the bleak earth at every descent into the hollow.

It wasn't as if she trusted him but more as if she felt secure that he would never dare cross her. On some occasions, the sack's load had been lightened since he last saw it. Other times, it appeared burdened with an undeniable weight that made him contemplate what hidden secrets it could contain. Cross couldn't help but succumb to the temptation that had been incessantly clawing at his mind, though he was content to remain patient for now. After all, it would do Cross no good to tackle the issue unless he had a weapon as formidable as the Raven's rope dart.

Not only that, but Cross had also become reliant upon the Raven for sustenance. She had honed her skill of hunting barbots with preternatural precision, snatching the behemoths out of the fiery heavens in mid-flight with a single throw of her rope dart as if drawing fish from a tranquil lake. And after snaring one of the colossal avians, Cross and Gimlet would gather its carcass like clockwork.

The trio formed an unlikely bond, a harmonious little family shining in the bleakness of their broken world.

Yet, frequently, Cross considered taking Gimlet and fleeing, but he never did—for he knew she'd track them down. And the next time they ran their con, he was sure she'd not give him a single divine chattel.

Their current objects did not provide Cross enough firepower to break into Paradise, yet he was confident he could fashion a means of entry. He could use those fiery salamanders to ignite some explosives and create a hole in the wall

of Paradise large enough for him to enter. To do this, he would first have to steal explosives from one of the many gangs that were always at spiritual war. The magical compass could dismantle bolts and hinges from the gates if not wholly buckle them or disarm any sentries that may confront him. But these ideas were all moot until he could separate the Raven from the burlap sack and gain access to its enchanted artifacts.

He toiled to synchronize his sleeping cycles with the Raven's, only to discover her sleeping habits were ever-changing. He would drift off into slumber as she lingered in wakefulness, and when they both succumbed to sleep, he awoke to find her already stirring in consciousness.

During one balmy waking period, the Raven netted a trove of fresh barbot eggs she had pilfered from a nest. And as Cross fed a couple to Gimlet, the Raven's bewitching gaze followed his every movement. He had seen the same hungry look in many women's eyes before, though he wasn't sure what it meant coming from her—she was always a riddle to him.

With that thought, he allowed her to witness him intently inspecting her physique, measuring her response. Even wearing her masculine clothing, he found her alluring, with a fragility that lured him in. At rest, her wings draped limp down her back like a cape of chastity. They blended intimately with her justacorps, creating an illusion of fur atop the fabric as if she had no wings at all. Her silhouette hinted at the wonder that lay beneath the garment and tested his ferocious urge to ravish her perfect blend of graceful curves and strength. He yearned to pull at strands of her silky black hair, which cascaded past her shoulders when not hidden by that hideous top hat.

The Raven locked eyes with him as if reading his mind,

and electricity coursed through Cross's nephesh. Her austere yet captivating beauty had taken hold of him, and the scent of her delicate skin was intoxicating. An all-encompassing stir to sate his craving for her surged through him, yet he remained dubious of her unanticipated ardor.

Lechery had always been considered the most trivial of all sins, and as such, it was often the indulgence of choice among those sentenced to an eternity of damnation. It brought momentary pleasure to the desolate lives of many in a realm beyond redemption. And the Underworld emboldened spirits to revel in any perverse carnal depravity, no matter how sick and wicked, free from repercussions of the living, such as pregnancy, but not disease. Choosing the wrong partner meant a soul would be liable for consequences that stretched far beyond earthly afflictions. Some unions would bring an unearthly price as lust remained the simplest technique that the Master employed to bind souls into eternal servitude.

Cross parted his lips to voice his suspicion, but the Raven put her finger across them before he could articulate any foolishness.

She smothered his mouth with hers. Her thin lips moved against his, her tongue exploring every corner of his mouth.

Their breath mingled, hot and desperate against the sweltering heat of the Underworld, as Cross hungrily drank from her.

Despite her gasps of pleasure, Cross's suspicion of her sudden display of romantic affection lingered. But the fervor of the second enraptured him, and he could not bring himself to lament or decline her offer.

He gave in.

Cross pulled the Raven close, inhaling the scent of her hair, a mix of smoke and something sweet. His hands roamed over her astral surface, smooth and alive with heat.

Her soft gasps filled his ears, drowning out the rumble of the sky furnace.

His hand gripped her raven hair with ferocity as she tore at his clothes, her movements frenzied and wild.

The justacorps slipped from her shoulders; his shirt was lost in the delirium of their passion.

Her fingers stroked the bulges of his chest and abdomen.

Warmth trickled through him like molten gold.

The Raven pushed Cross onto the quilt with unexpected strength, pinning him beneath her. Her wings unfurled in full span like a dark halo, stark and endless against the scorching sky outside their cave. She smiled, and it was a rare sight. It lit up her face with an intensity that devoured his every doubt.

Hesitation flickered in her eyes, quickly replaced by raw lust. She moved atop him with a fury that matched his own. Her breath came hard as she wrapped herself around him, a tempest with no refuge but each other.

Cross gripped the Raven and flipped her onto her back.

Her ebony feathers rippled like a stormy wind had blown over them, creating a midnight bed of delicate petals atop the quilt.

His hands explored each silken curve of her astral surface with delicate caresses as if she were Paradise awaiting his passage. He glided his tongue around her collarbone, relishing her taste. His lips moved from her neck to her chest as he caressed his hands around each sinuous curve of her body, evoking sighs of delight from within her depths.

The Raven's fingertips grazed over Cross's head. Her touch was both tender and savage.

Cross hungrily drew the Raven's succulent bosom to his lips. His tongue meandered and caressed her hardened nipple. He teased and tantalized it with each lick, showering her chest with kisses that made her shudder, writhe, and moan.

The Raven's wings unfurled around them in a shroud of black, enclosing them in their own private universe where time and consequence ceased to exist.

Cross marveled at how fragile she seemed beneath him, how vulnerable this fallen angel could be, yet knowing she could ruin him with ease. The way she surrendered to him enflamed every dark corner of his corrupted soul.

Their spirits collided like the forces of chaos destined to meet, transcending the spiritual realm and tapping into the realm of the divine. As their ruachs entwined, the desolation of the Underworld faded into insignificance—a mere backdrop to their all-encompassing rapture. All that existed was their fierce abandon and the overwhelming desire to be annihilated by each other. They were two conflagrant wills moving together in their shared lust, each touch sparking life into their weary spirits, each kiss a pact of reckless passion renewed again and again.

Cross lost himself in that euphoric state, entranced, ensnared, and overwhelmed by the dizzying intoxication of being enfolded in the beautiful creature's embrace. His nephesh oscillated at a higher level, a rhythm that pulsed with celestial energy. Every astral layer within him quivered as the sensation of tiny divine fingers gently plucked at the strings of his Mind, Emotions, and Will. An ethereal frequency coursed through him like a warm electric current, sending sparks of euphoria tingling through his

entire ruach. A sense of weightlessness came over him, carrying him to a realm he had never been before, a place suspended between dream and reality.

The Raven's breath became a fevered pant as she yielded to Cross's embrace. A sweet and melodious chime rang out in the depths of her spirit, a heavenly melody unknown to mortal ears. Her cries saturated the cave as Cross delved deeper. Her frame undulated in incomparable rapture, culminating in unsurpassable heights of intense, blissful gratification.

At last, they lay panting, sweat-slicked, and exhausted, yet sated by the sheer enormity of what had passed between them. It was as if Hell's fire had consumed them both, yet they emerged whole on the other side.

That moment with the Raven had revitalized Cross's nephesh, breathing vigor into places once hollowed by darkness. They had stolen something precious from eternity—a means to defy their fate—if only for a heartbeat of time in the grand scheme of infinity. Their spirits had fed off one another with such voracity that he remembered what it was like to truly live—not just to exist. He felt more alive than he had in decades of death, feeling nearly as alive as he had during life itself. The despair and hopelessness that permeated the Underworld felt worlds away for now.

The Raven lay beside him—breathless, beautiful, her eyes closed as if she dared to dream again. A fleeting smile graced her lips before she opened her eyes to meet his gaze with an intensity that swayed between triumph and vulnerability.

Cross's encounters with various hetaeras, who dwelled upon the colossal backs of the roving xrafstars, helped hone his ability to distinguish genuine passion from its hollow imitation. And he found no traces of deceit in the Raven's

unmistakable delight in their shared intimacy. Her authenticity was undeniable, a truth that both comforted and confounded him.

With newfound resolve coursing through him, Cross realized he might not need to wait until he matched the Raven's weaponry to make his move on the sack full of divine chattel. With this new closeness between them, she might even willingly let him examine its contents if he played things right.

But would he ever dare trust her? Could she trust him? He didn't have answers yet; only electric uncertainty surged through his limbs as they lay tangled under the grim expanse of the burning sky.

Cross cradled the Raven in his arms. The warmth of their closeness washed over him. But his contentment dissipated as he sensed the moment slip away from them. He ached to stay rooted there forever, reluctant to break the serene spell of tranquility, but an awareness of his surroundings tugged at him. This was a mere interlude before they submerged themselves back into reality.

Cross planted one last lingering kiss upon the Raven's lips, savoring every moment until she pulled away, relinquishing his embrace.

"Stay." The Raven's voice was stern and insistent, commanding Cross like he was an obedient puppy.

He wondered if she now considered him hers. He wondered if it mattered.

The Raven gave him a sly look before rising gracefully to redress herself. She moved about camp with renewed vigor, hastening to don her jaded trousers, aged blouse, and bespattered justacorps. There was no regret in her motions, no shame or hesitation—only a quiet triumph that matched his own sense of conquest.

Cross rose to his feet, mirroring her actions, his hands mechanically pulling on his beat-up trousers. His mind, however, was a whirlwind of disbelief, grappling with how deftly the Raven had unraveled his defenses. Crossing the threshold of intimacy with her had transformed her into an even more formidable presence, her allure now laced with an undeniable peril.

She wore that cursed top hat again but left her justacorps unbuttoned; its loose fit revealed glimpses of skin, making focusing difficult for Cross.

"I'll be gone for a while," she said. "Longer than usual." She pulled out the cigar lighter he'd coveted from the very start and flicked it open with casual ease.

A tiny salamander flared to life on the wick before vanishing as if it never existed—a brief blaze in an eternal night.

"You're playing with fire," Cross said, unable to suppress a grin.

She laughed at that, a genuine laugh that sent a flood of emotion coursing through him. It was not merely desire but a fierce attachment he hadn't expected or even hoped for in a world where everything was eventually lost.

"Don't overthink it," the Raven said with sly mirth in her voice, tossing his shirt back at him.

Yet Cross found it impossible to resist; his propensity for overanalyzing was, in fact, his most astute trait. His meticulous plotting had been his salvation, rescuing him from perilous situations time and again.

He wondered if this new dynamic between them would affect their con—or if it already had, and he just couldn't see it yet. Perhaps he'd played right into her hands once more; perhaps she'd shown weakness on purpose so he'd lower his guard again. A nagging suspicion gnawed at him

—had the Raven detected his urge to escape? Was she employing an implied promise of more sex as a cunning snare to keep him tethered? If that was her game, she had played it masterfully, leaving him awash with profound shame. How he wished such a primitive ploy hadn't worked on him.

Yet what worried him most of all was how little any of that seemed to matter now. For maybe the first time since he'd come to the Underworld, Cross didn't want to care about strategy or advantage—only the strange and potent bond he felt with the enigmatic Raven.

Gimlet returned from feasting on barbot eggs and eyed them suspiciously before settling down beside Cross, nuzzling against him like an old dog seeking affection.

Cross patted Gimlet's center horn distractedly, schemes forming in his mind—plans and possibilities now seeming far more plausible after the intimate bond he had forged with the Raven.

The Raven gathered all the provisions for her departure, unfurled her wings, and soared away into the flaming skyline, leaving Cross with a heavy nephesh as he watched her dwindle into the horizon.

Cross ached for another tender moment wrapped in the quilt with the Raven, prompting him to submit to her decree and patiently await her return.

After several languid sleep cycles, the Raven finally reemerged. Without a word, her bewitched rope dart wound around Cross, devouring every bit of mobility he possessed. Its stiff, icy twine twisted tighter around him until its grip left no room for escape.

"Well, hello to you too," Cross said.

"We're going for a ride," the Raven said.

"Where?"

"Duat."

"That's at least a week's ride from here," he said, "including sleep cycles."

"Mmhmm," she said.

"That's a long way to go while tied up."

"If our little act is going to work, you need to be bound long before we ride into the city."

"I don't think anyone will notice if you wait till we get a little closer."

"You just keep your neck attached to your shoulders. I'll do the thinking."

The rope dart hoisted Cross onto Gimlet's hindquarters, plopping him face down.

2 - AMENTHES

Cross swayed his head to the rhythm of Gimlet's spiked tail swiveling across the gradually shifting scenery from jagged canyons to rolling dunes.

The sand twinkled beneath the inferno above, a sea of scintillating diamonds cast in red-orange illumination.

Had it not been for the looming dread of Cross heading directly to his pursuers, the swaying of Gimlet's tail would have lulled him into a trance-like state.

Gimlet's hooves plunged deep into the sea of sand, a haze of dust dancing around them with each step, joining the conflagration above.

The heavens fomented with unrestrained exasperation as dappled red streaks, vibrant vermillion ribbons, and blotches of flame swept across the ebony expanse like an inextricable vortex of electricity.

Gimlet's thick hide pulsated with heat, heightened by gusts of wind carrying a stench of minerals and spices that filled each breath.

The coarse grains were a mixture of small pebbles and larger stones that should have crunched with each step, yet the silence swallowed their sound like an old memory fading away. The desert seemed to wipe out all traces of their passing as if to keep them hidden, shifting beneath Gimlet's hooves and erasing any sign that they had ever been there. It was as if everyone who ventured here disappeared in its vastness, never to return.

As Gimlet's steps quieted, palpable darkness settled over the realm, signaling only one thing: something sinister was stirring within the sprawling realm of Duat. The air was heavy with a palpable sense of dread and mystery, yet the thrill of their next swindle burned steadily within Cross.

Further ahead lay mounds of ash and rubble, calcified stones crushed by whatever befell this forgotten land, cinders skirting across those broken pieces like wayward marbles. Burned spirits, long abandoned by the afterlife, were scattered among the ruins. It was an ethereal sight, where one could feel the presence of horrific secrets immortalized in history.

Mystifying spires and monoliths dwarfed the trio, not just in magnitude. These immense columns stood resolute against time's river, their surfaces glistening like celestial jewels. Embers flared and sparks shot through the murky abyss above, setting ablaze these gargantuan slabs of obsidian, quartz, tungsten, agate, and diamond.

The ancient kingdom of Amenthes burst into view, its towering pyramids looming ever closer, standing sentinel-like against the expanse of the desert. Despite desolation all

around, the city shone with a flash of brilliance. A golden sheen blanketed the kingdom, a testament to its majestic glory. This was no ordinary realm of the Underworld; the Egyptians of Amenthes had put considerable effort into preserving the sanctity of their lands.

Gimlet bore Cross and the Raven along the periphery of several pyramids, standing erect in the hazy, flame-engulfed expanse. Despite their magnificence, Cross felt insignificant against the monumental backdrop. His gaze flickered over the nine immense structures that likely harbored countless divine chattel he desperately yearned to lay his hands on.

"Raven," Cross said. "These pyramids must have all kinds of objects in them."

"Sure," the Raven said with a nonchalant indifference.

A wave of envy swept Cross, acutely aware of the futility of ever attaining the divine treasures ensconced within the pyramids' walls.

He hefted his gaze skyward to behold the pinnacles of every pyramid, recalling the illustrations in his former boss's study that always portrayed an eye at the peaks of pyramids, yet none of the majestic structures presented any such humongous eyes.

Instead, their limestone blocks were honed immaculately, crested with gold, and ablaze amidst the conflagration. Radiant lances of smoldering fire, each more oppressive than the next, scorched down from their home in the hellish heavens and stabbed into the apexes of the pyramids.

The majestic triangular architecture reached toward the blazing sky at different altitudes, each fashioned in sleek stonework. Gleaming black, shimmering vermillion, and glimmering alabaster cascaded in a spectacle of grandeur,

glinting in the brumous, incandescent sky of the Underworld.

A titanic xrafstar crested the horizon beyond the city of Amenthes, with a thunderous rumble shaking the realm's towers and spires. Though it was leagues away, the ancient behemoth could traverse entire realms in a few epic strides, and it would arrive in the kingdom within moments—its colossal legs stretching across miles, bringing entire settlements upon its broad back.

Cross had ventured upon the mythical monstrosity before, sojourning with the Nwa-Efé tribe, who dwelled in remote hamlets nestled atop the daunting crags of the monster. Yet he had always marveled at the xrafstar's grandeur—a relic of ages ago still carrying the secrets of whatever god birthed it.

Cross had never been interested in sightseeing the many horrifying realms of the Underworld until he became a wanted spirit. He had avoided all the wonders that each realm offered, if you could call them wonders. But now, as the notorious 'Man Who Remembers,' he found himself drawn to their allure of discovery and seeking the mysteries and dark corners of these forbidden lands—perhaps to distract himself from his troubles.

The trio marched closer and closer to a looming temple. A vast stone gate encircled the temple, a magnificently carved masterpiece of people and creatures more vivid than life itself, stretching into eternity.

A thousand voices in unison engulfed them as their melodious song rolled like thunder through the stifling wind.

Cross found himself involuntarily grinning and swaying in time with the thumping rhythm of their cadence as

Gimlet marched them closer to the festivities, its volume increasingly growing.

He quickly resurfaced as he forced his features to reflect the role of a prisoner not to arouse any suspicions that this was all part of an elaborate plan he and the Raven had set into motion. He clung to the mask of resignation, knowing that his fate depended on it.

Oppressive gusts swept up a dizzying array of distinctive fragrances—the sweet spices of a bustling market, the floral aromas of grains and blossoms, the familiar tang of tanned leather, and the pungent musk of the ancient zoo in Xibalbá. The acrid stink of animal sweat and dung persisted, and underlying notes of moldy hay and loamy earth swirled together in a sickening tumult.

Cross beheld a sight like something out of a dream as the trio crested the gate: a dance of color and motion unfurling in an orderly procession down a lane between towering statues of revered deities and fear-inducing creatures. At its terminus stood the majestic Egyptian temple.

Gimlet navigated Cross and the Raven between the colossi of massy idols towering in the throes of the molten heavens, their silhouettes stark and monstrous against the obsidian obelisks, pointing to a spire with metal glinting off its facets like stars on fire.

An eclectic assembly of beast-people filled the temple's courtyard—cat people ranging from panthers to cheetahs to lions, their movements lithe and silent; dog people ranging from jackals to hyenas to wolves, their human hands, and feet nimble, their toes able to cling to nearly any surface. Every imaginable hybrid of beastly spirit mingled within the heaving crowd—falcons, rams, baboons, and hippopotami alike—all glided on graceful gaits through the

sweltering heat, their fur, and feathers encumbered by the oppressive air as they pressed towards the bailey's center.

"They're all gathered here for you, Cross," the Raven said.

"You did all this for me?" Cross asked, a wave of emotions surging through him.

"In a way," she said. "It's far easier to disappear into a crowd."

A confused melange of exhilaration and disbelief at the commotion over his memories, Cross was touched that the Egyptian people had convened to revere him with such an elaborate spectacle, yet it was ludicrous that they would go to such lengths for something so insignificant. Despite their naivety, Cross couldn't help but appreciate the effort of these foolish and undeserving people since the squals had set such a lofty standard for honoring him.

Cross's gaze caught that of a quartet of female faces crowned with feline features, standing aloof from the chaos.

Coolly, he winked at them.

They all shot back an icy hiss.

"Raven," Cross said as he jostled atop Gimlet's hindquarters, "You ever wonder why these spirits would give up their precious valuables to chop off my head? I mean, they only want memories. What good are those? Mine ain't nothing but... they're just useless."

"Useless maybe to you," the Raven said atop Gimlet's saddle. "To them, there's nothing more valuable than life, even when it's just a distant memory. Some would do just about anything for an exodus. No matter how minor the escape."

Further on, the crowd of beast-people gazed in awe at the towering jambs of blunt stone ahead. It rose like a

mountain; its summit was flat as a table, and its surface was an intricate tapestry of painted gods and goddesses.

The Raven presented Cross as a prisoner to the awaiting circle of men at the temple entrance. The men bore the heads of hounds, their diamond-like eyes glinting in the eerie red-orange illumination that hung heavy in the air.

Cross feigned indignation and outrage, pretending that he had no idea the Raven would come back for him and liberate him later.

A hairless lion, its hide wrinkled and an angry shade of pink, slinked out of the temple with the spoils of Cross's capture clenched in its paws. A profusion of ugly black splotches polluted the lion's sagging skin.

The Raven received the sack of blessings as they had plotted. Her rope dart uncoiled itself from around Cross and rippled through the air, wrapping snugly around the Raven's waist.

Two dogmen stepped forward, their paws clamped on either side of Cross, their grip secure.

"Get your stinkin' paws off me!" Cross yelled with theatricality, fully immersing himself in character.

The mongrels manhandled Cross past a haunting specter, grasping a sign that declared: The Resurrection of the Dead Approaches. The End Is Near.

"You must mean the rear end," Cross said. "Because your head's far up your ass."

A powerful punch landed squarely in Cross's stomach, sending a shock through his core that extinguished his breath and resiliency. He collapsed in agony, like a marionette cut from its strings. Time stood still as he stifled a groan of agony, pondering if this foolhardy venture was worth risking his neck. Had he just put himself in more danger than he needed to? Inevitably, for the time being, all

he could do was power through the pain and pretend to cooperate with these dogmen, if only for the time being.

The Raven extended Cross's macuahuitl to the aged high priest like an offering, cradling it delicately, her palms flat against the sharp obsidian edges.

"As a token of my gratitude," the Raven said, "I would suggest you use this blade."

Cross's black ichor ran warm. The Raven had not divulged to him that she would relinquish his obsidian blade into the hands of his captors. And Cross could only ponder what other surprises she had withheld and what intricate schemes she had hidden away and chose not to disclose.

His newfound distress probably came across as authentic to the Egyptians because it was now genuine. Deep in his nephesh, he wondered if the Raven had sought to drive home some point with this surprise; had she seen through his mask of pretense? Was she attempting to jolt him from his façade and force him to experience a genuine reaction to the grim reality he was supposed to be facing? Or was it all just conjecture? Should he give her the presumption of benevolence? Yet another thought for him to mull during a ruse that seemed ever more foolish.

The Raven presented the macuahuitl to the wrinkled lion with a humble head bowed before him in respect.

The high priest regally waved away the Raven's offering without sparing a flicker of his gaze upon the macuahuitl. "We hold not the need, for our own method shall suffice," the high priest said with a haughty demeanor. The glint in his narrowing cat eyes betrayed his impatience.

"I offer not toward your need," the Raven said, "but instead, I propose to resonate with your purpose. This obsidian blade once belonged to the goddess Sia."

"Are you certain?" The high priest dropped his twinkling gaze onto the macuahuitl with a sense of reverence.

"I discovered it in Re's boat," the Raven said. "I thought maybe I'd find the sacred papyrus in there too, but this was all I found. The deities sure left in a hurry."

Cross now realized that the Raven deceitfully misled the high priest. She lied almost as expertly as Cross, but he could not discern why she wanted the high priest to wield his obsidian blade with such urgency.

Despite seeming interested in the Raven's lie, the high priest did not instantly accept the blade as a tribute. He paused, lifting an inquisitive brow—or where his brow might have been if he weren't hairless—in suspicion and doubt.

"Look, I have my bounty already," the Raven said, lofting up the newly filled burlap sack of divine chattel. "I could've left town without saying a word and kept the blade for myself. I just thought it would mean more to you and your people than it does to me. But if you don't want it, I'm sure it can make some hodder happy."

The high priest placed his paw on the blade. "Suffer not thy haste; grant me the chance to behold."

The flabby old lion reached out with a trembling hand and ran his paws along the macuahuitl's surface before grasping the wooden hilt and lifting it off the Raven's outstretched hands. The high priest raised a single paw in a gesture that venerated the blade. His coarse pads grazed it as if they were worshipping an ancient artifact, and his gaze was both awestruck and wary. As if he could not wholly trust what the Raven had told him, yet was still humbled by its magnificent aura. He inspected it discerningly, his gaze tracing every groove and etching on its surface. His feline eyes widened with awe, gleaming like

polished jewels as he surveyed the artifact's ornate engravings and meticulous craftsmanship. Finally, he nodded with a stern expression of approval and said, "Your graciousness is unparalleled. We shall accept this offering."

The Raven slyly winked at Cross, an assurance that comforted him even as the scruffy mutts ushered him up the incline to the temple's roof.

While escaping the fetid squals' den beneath the wreathing fog of the misty Metnal mountains, Cross needed to draw close enough to the Raven so she could fling his macuahuitl to him. But this time, instead of being situated away from him, the weapon would be perilously close, within the grasp of the high priest and poised just above his neck. Once the Raven set him loose, all he needed to do was reach up and snatch it from the high priest's hands.

The peak of the majestic temple soared above the tumultuous crowd of beastly spirits who bawled and jeered in the courtyard below.

Cross's sightline extended beyond them to the gargantuan xrafstar perched like a mountain on the city's outskirts, its form casting an austere shadow amongst the desert sand.

Hundreds of Egyptian spirits had already gathered as more spirits converged on the city in mass to witness the spectacle of his beheading, and their impending disappointment delighted Cross.

The maleficent mongrels hauled Cross towards a massive quartz slab on display for the crowd below.

Cross acted as if he were attempting to resist the dogmens' grip. "Let me go, you dirty mutts! Why don't you go chase your high priest down the road like the dogs you

are? Your high priest is nothing but a bald pussy. You know it. I know it. Everybody knows it."

The firelight above illuminated the crystal altar, creating a sparkle like stars dancing in the night sky. The shifting light cast odd, ever-shifting shadows across the high priest's muzzle.

Then, with one last tug, the dogmen laid Cross on the arcane surface of the quartz altar before their hairless high priest and bound Cross's wrists together with glistening manacles. This unexpected turn unnerved him.

The lion-priest threw his flabby, lanky arms to the flaming sky and roared a prayer in an ancient language of gods and magicians, like a ritual to evoke forgotten heka.

Cross was far from a connoisseur of the arcane arts, yet he remained confident that none of the damned could ever wield the capacity to manipulate heka. The only magic he knew about was the diablerie of devils and demons or those rare objects blessed by divinity. They were imbued with powerful heka and went far beyond what the damned could conjure with spells.

Yet the high priest's chants and incantations rattled through the courtyard as if woven with thunderous vibrations, rippling against the stone walls in a cyclonic wave. His voice boomed and swelled until it thundered with the strength of a mighty waterfall, crashing against the walls like a thunderous clap of celestial power. His muzzle issued every word as if written in destiny's script.

The air roiled, resonating in harmony with the fierce firestorm above. Glittering flame sparks careened across the sky, spinning in a wild vortex of heat that blistered Cross's astral surface and seared his hair. The undulating blaze seemed to be a vengeful prayer from the high priest, awakening the gods in a rage and inciting their wrath.

The rumbling chorus of a million detonations resounded in the distance. Near the craggy Metnal Mountains, home of the squals, a rift opened in the flaming sky. Glowing hues of magenta, indigo, and azure danced across its ethereal expanse. Its brilliance was so blinding that it felt like a hammer of pure lightning struck Cross.

Yet Cross remained transfixed on the enthralling grandeur alongside the craggy lion, his hounds, and the feral mob in the courtyard below.

An azure ring of flames coursed from the rip in the firmament. This brilliant flare stretched across the burning sky for several acres as it propagated outward like a bolt of lightning, shimmering and igniting the heavens with an expanding halo.

A wall of wind raced ahead of the corona, a sight both monstrous and magnificent; its radiance ignited the opalescent sky, unleashing thunderous destruction as it reverberated towards the temple, its power shaking the pillars of its foundation to their core before it even arrived.

The crowd stilled as the thunderous echo of the approaching onslaught drew closer. The air hung in a mournful hush, like a graveyard awaiting its long-lost guests. None could escape from this overwhelming power.

A blazing surge of heat crashed into Cross, and a spiraling twister of wind howled by as the temple quaked. Its ancient stones groaned and splintered, perilously close to shattering into myriads of fragments.

The air ruptured in a thunderous boom as the detonation blasted through the atmosphere, shards of crystalline flame erupting in all directions. The clamor was near unbearable, its reverberations lingering long after the shockwave had dissipated.

The people in the courtyard stopped in their tracks, a

momentary stillness washing over them like an impenetrable fog. Then, the air in the temple sucked backward in another tangible wave, as if by a cosmic magnet, towards the gaping chasm in the sky.

Cheers and trumpets blared as screams and shouts filled the courtyard, accompanied by a wild mingling of elated chatter and laughter. All the energy within the courtyard transformed into an immense, frenzied show of joy.

Cross quaked with terror and awe as he beheld the commanding heka the high priest conjured, somehow unlocking a power far more sinister and volatile than Cross had ever expected.

The aged high priest waved a golden relic above Cross, which resembled his Latin cross but bore the subtle yet striking difference of an elongated loop of metal protruding from the crossbeam.

With slow precision, the bald lion brought the ornament to rest on the tip of Cross's nose.

A spark leaped forth, and a bolt of energy surged the length of Cross, jolting him and alerting all three parts of his ruach to stand at attention.

Steeling himself for what was to come, Cross closed his eyes as the high priest brought the glowing object closer and laid it against his forehead.

In that fraction of a second, a strange tugging sensation coursed through Cross as though some invisible force were attempting to extract something from within him; he could almost feel the inward-moving tendrils probing his nephesh before receding back into nothingness and leaving him relieved and strangely energized. As suddenly as it had enveloped him, the warmth dissipated, leaving nothing but the faintest memory of a dream. Yet beneath this façade of tranquility, something ancient stirred within him.

The high priest ceremoniously bestowed the sacred relic on the paws of a mongrel and then solemnly hefted the macuahuitl to the fiery heavens, allowing its majesty to reflect off of every layer of the rapturous crowd of beast-people.

"The past is a sea of blood and death," the high priest said to the onlookers, "and many have drowned within its depths. But with this blade, fashioned from the hairs of the goddess Sia and blessed with all her might, we shall sever the ruach, free the nephesh, and grant the damned a swim through the mind, emotion, and will of the living. May the Great Goddess have mercy on his soul."

The crowd's thundering cries of joy swelled into a deafening crescendo of rapturous energy, jubilantly declared, with whistles, shouts, and ecstatic applause that seemed to bring life to the very stones of the temple. Hoots and hollers reverberated throughout the walls while some beat their feet on the floor like a drum in unison. Roars of approval multiplied in deafening intensity around the courtyard, bouncing off every surface in a call for solidarity. A fire of excitement burned, seizing the atmosphere with its vigor, as if lightning had been released into this unholy place, rolling and crashing around all those gathered for Cross.

The high priest raised the macuahuitl above Cross's neck, and all Cross could do was wait and hope the Raven would swoop down heroically and rescue him anytime now. The idea of him being a damsel in distress was absurd initially, yet it was preferable to having his head lopped off.

But the more the high priest drawled on, each passing moment that bore no rescue from the Raven deepened Cross's dread. Doubt loomed heavy in his mind, and uncertainty over the Raven's desire to extricate him from his predicament condensed around him like a spectral fog.

Cross lifted his head from his bed of quartz, surveying the crowd for any sign of the Raven's presence. He darted his gaze up to the summit of the pyramids, across the temple walls, and then down among the throng. There remained no sign of her.

Though Cross was painfully aware that the wingspan of their fragile relationship did not yet stretch far enough to overcome the aching chasm of mistrust that had formed between them, he clung to the desperate hope that the peculiar connection they once shared had endured beyond Raven's insatiable avarice.

He waited, his apprehension growing like a smoldering fire. How long would the Raven keep him in suspense? Had she abandoned him? If she had ended their alliance, she could have been out of the city by now, galloping away with Gimlet and all the divine chattel he had so foolishly placed in her care. He cursed himself. He should not have trusted her. The damned did not hold any honor; they had already lost it in life, and now he had been foolish enough to trust a harpy unworthy of such faith. What an imprudent mistake he had committed.

The high priest gripped Cross's head firmly, forcing it back onto the icy altar.

"Wait!" Cross yelled, convinced that this was his last hour. "Don't do this. Please!"

Cross jolted his frame against the shackles, encasing him in an underworldly hold, and clamminess drenched him. His nephesh thumped against his ruach like a hammer. Each beat nauseatingly close together. Breath tore from his lungs in distant gasps as fear rattled from his lungs, rendering it hard to breathe. An ominous dread slinked around him like a constrictor, its frigid coils strangling him as helplessness seized him. This was not only the

moment when fate had come to collect its due debt; this was when it would finally claim him.

The four brute mongrels held Cross securely as the high priest raised the macuahuitl like a hammer of fate. The sharpened stones of obsidian reflected the firelight in an almost beatific glimmer, and Cross could only hold his breath as he waited for second death to take him.

The obsidian blade swung down.

CHAPTER 10
THE PATH TO CROSS

1 - FORFAX

Diamond Tooth rode the ankou's ferry across the white void. The boat glided past the nymphs who gamboled in the meadows and sailed through the A'raf. The vessel protected her from the scintillating bolts of lightning that lashed out from the barrier of Paradise, and the lumenite stone the ankou had forced into her chest cavity pulsed and radiated a searing heat with each crash of the lightning. But the further they traveled away from the A'raf, the more it cooled to a steady beat, warning her that if she ever returned, it would act as a homing beacon to draw down the bolts and detonate her new heart, annihilating her in an instant.

But now that Diamond Tooth had arrived back in the Underworld, she took deep breaths of the repugnant odors of sulfuric decay that surrounded the eternal souls of torment, yet it did not revive her as it usually would have. Returning to this plane of immortal, rotting souls left her feeling more drained than ever.

Diamond Tooth worried the lumenite had altered her internal makeup. She badgered the ankou with endless queries concerning it, yet the ancient spirit remained mute, propelling them in stoic silence towards Amenthes in the realm of Duat.

The boat did not cease to move for many sleep cycles until they reached their destination, at which point the ankou released Diamond Tooth unceremoniously and spiraled off towards the Southern Inferno, leaving nothing but a sandstorm in its wake. As its silhouette faded into the horizon, Diamond Tooth pondered what mysteries the lumenite within her held.

The liberated city of Amenthes was now the refuge of those who had sought a sanctuary away from the reign of terror brought about by the gang wars that had breached and cast down all the walls that used to divide the realms of the Underworld.

Legions of displaced spirits congregated in its streets for a festival. They twirled and sang to a diabolically enchanting refrain that scarcely disturbed the raging flames above. It was an almost whimsical melody that percolated with life and spoke to the relentless spirit of those who had made it their new home.

Diamond Tooth swept into the temple's courtyard.

The thunderous noise of the crowd seemed to grow in volume with every step she took, her gaze casting over the bustling throng. Each animalistic head and muzzle blurred in her pursuit of Forfax, the rogue squal she had recruited weeks before to uncover additional information about Clem Balfour.

The putrid stench of Forfax wafted into Diamond Tooth's nostrils before the clammy squal slinked up to her, his gauze bindings obscuring his features.

Bleached bands bound the scrawny creature's head, and black liquid seeped through the tattered wrappings. The Tribulation garb he sported hung too loose and was ill-fitting on such a gaunt frame. Men fashioned it for men and not squals.

"Do you have it?" Forfax twirled and wound himself around her in an obsequious gyre, his supplications making him seem like a loyal hound. "Do you? Do you?"

Diamond Tooth held Rowings's treasured ring tight in her grasp, its facets glinting in the firelight.

Forfax sprang from the ground with desperate fervor, lunging for the coveted bauble.

But Diamond Tooth tugged it away just in time, stifling any chance of him seizing it.

"What'd you find out?" Diamond Tooth asked.

The loathsome creature huffed.

Diamond Tooth's lips, chapped and cracked from a combination of desert travel and not being able to recover from her time in Paradise, stifled the impatience that had been brewing deep within her since she began this quest and whispered with a tinge of urgency, "Where is Tivoli?"

"All I know is-sss Tivoli is-sss Clem Balfour."

"I know that already," Diamond Tooth said. "Anything else?"

"He's-sss one ear sss-short, and he lives-sss with a girl called Lenore."

"Where is she?"

"I sss-suffered a head injury, you know. My memory is-sss not sss-so good." Forfax's bony digits cracked in the air, a silent yet deliberate request for her to give him the ring. His every gesture charged the surrounding air with the promise of unfulfilled aspirations.

Diamond Tooth's patience ended. Her lumenite heart

pounded in her chest as if it would soon burst out of her ruach. She had been searching for answers for so long—keys that would unlock her destiny. She wouldn't rest until she found them.

Diamond Tooth flung the token into the air, arching it towards the figure of Forfax.

Forfax's bony hands encircled it, and he cradled it to his chest as though it were the most delicate of treasures, exulting in its sacredness with an ecstatic jig. His joy manifested in every bounce he made, reverently cherishing his precious.

"Now, where is she?" Diamond Tooth asked. "Where is Lenore?"

"Mictlān," the squal said. "Mictlān. sss-She's-sss in Mount Mictlān."

Diamond Tooth wended her way through the masses, the courtyard receding farther as she stepped beyond the city walls.

In the simmering shadows of sand and smoke, she meandered into the alley of colossal pyramids. The sandstone structures towered above her—mighty guardians of a forgotten past.

Wind whipped around her, rustling the sand surrounding her boots into a gentle, eternal drumbeat that raced through her new heart.

The lumenite's glory radiated through her. There was a power in it, old and alive, that resounded with her every breath.

A behemoth xrafstar towered beyond the pyramids, its pale gray base fading into a cerise hue at its apex. Craters pockmarked its weathered hide, etched with the agelessness of time.

If it was traveling North, she could ride it to Mount

Mictlān, freeing her several sleep cycles, many arduous hours of marching through wind and sand, and gambling away her prospects of catching Balfour.

Diamond Tooth strode towards a group of pigmies, a formidable figure compared to their small stature.

Their tiny bodies tensed at her approach. Her looming shadow cast a pallor over them as she asked the little troupe about their travel plans.

The pigmies exchanged glances before the fat tribe leader stepped forward and answered, as if seeking to mollify this imposing figure. "We are full, my fellow traveler," the tribal chief said. "We can take no more!"

"I'll ride outside," Diamond Tooth said.

"Bold," the tribal chief said. "But not an option."

"You ride on the back of a mountain," she said. "How can you be full?"

"The xrafstar is not just a landform but our friend and our life source," the tribal leader said, his voice rolling across the dense dunes surrounding them. "We respect it, honor it, and protect it with all our might."

"There must be a price." Diamond Tooth delved into the sack Rowings had gifted her, her fingers grazing over the three items within—one of which was a matchstick she'd tested during the dreaded journey on the ankou's boat. With careful consideration, she plucked out the cream of the collection to sell him on its heka.

"A match?" the tribe leader said.

"A match made in Paradise," she said. "It's re-lightable and never burns down. I've lit it at least a thousand times."

She struck the match against her bagh nakhs, its head bursting into a modest flame. As the seconds passed, the fire never devoured the stick but continued to burn without end, casting an ethereal glow across the pygmies' faces. It

was as if time had slowed to a halt, and the match would continue to burn undisturbed for all eternity.

"We reside in the realm of infernos," the chief said, his voice low and solemn. "Therefore, we eschew implements of flame."

Diamond Tooth exhaled, snuffing out the flame of the matchstick. It was the best token she could muster compared to the other two divine chattel remaining in her sack.

She delved into it absently, her chapped fingertips sweeping across various textures, searching for something else she might offer instead.

But the chief spoke out before she could retrieve any lesser artifact.

"The preservation of our people and the safeguarding of sustenance are constantly on our minds. What shall we do about those?" The tribal chief's coal eyes were full of hostility as he inclined his head toward Diamond Tooth's bagh nakhs, nudging her to give her prized gauntlets to him.

But there was no way she would ever relinquish them to him or anyone else. She had held onto them for so long that they had become a part of her. Nothing could separate them from her.

Clenching her fists within her gauntlets, Diamond Tooth envisioned burning the entire tribe and seizing the xrafstar for herself.

The guards tensed their muscles and lifted their spears menacingly toward her.

The tribal leader raised his hand, and a hush fell upon the hardened warriors. He uttered a guttural clicking sound with a slow cadence, and the warriors stood in formation, spears raised to salute their liege.

"Your objects have great significance for you," the tribal leader said. "This I understand. But our customs are ancient and must be obeyed. Either I become the keeper of those gauntlets, or we must come to another understanding." The chief slowly traced his fingers down Diamond Tooth's arm, their energy lingering like a poisonous fog.

He stood far too low ever to reach the heights of her bosom, though his dagger-like stare could've pierce through her shirt.

Diamond Tooth could have effortlessly sliced off his arm and stabbed through his eyes before the guards thrust their spears. Yet, each time the thought of burning him crossed her mind, her lumenite heart pulsed with aching intensity in her chest. It was almost as if an innate sense of morality had been instilled within her. But it was not an actual conscience. It was deceit, an insidious hex hidden in the dark crevices of her ruach. It could shape her future in unforeseen ways, and she was not ready to realize the devastating consequences that might ensue.

"To what lands do you travel?" the tribal leader intoned in a low, guttural growl, his slimy grip still pressing against her skin.

"Mount Mictlān," she said.

"Mictlān? You are certain? Only the most wretched of souls and squals dare venture there, deep into the unknown."

"Well, I ain't no squal," she said.

"I see that." He scanned her body without discretion, his gaze like a searing torch blazing across her curves. "We make our journey West to Kurr and must pass through Xibalbá on the way. That is as near to Mount Mictlān as it can be, but you shall need to pay extra."

The warriors snatched the sack of objects from Diamond Tooth's desperate grip.

"Extra?" Diamond Tooth said. "I'm not even traveling the whole way."

"The price is for entry, not the ride," the tribal leader said.

"So much for being full."

The tribal leader's laughter reverberated with a guttural snarl. It was an eerie and malicious guffaw, laced with a perverse sense of delight and superiority, underscored by a nasty undertone.

"The village is always full, my dear." The tribal leader laughed. "To make more room for my harem." He withdrew his grasp from her arm. "It shall be left up to you whether you join us or remain." His voice had a finality about it that left no room for argument.

The chief strode away from her, his tribesmen aiding him in climbing the ladder onto the xrafstar's mountainous foot as he was too portly to ascend on his own mobility.

Diamond Tooth had few choices available to her. The xrafstar ride would transport her to Mount Mictlān faster than any other form of transportation and with the least amount of tribulation. Perils abounded for those who traveled the Underworld on foot, especially with the ongoing spiritual wars.

A xrafstar outmaneuvered every predicament simply by stepping over it or trampling it. A herd of unbridled xrafstars once leveled an entire realm in one frenetic stampede.

Though Diamond Tooth embraced the sport of peril just as much as any other demon, in this case, jeopardy would only impede her voyage to her ultimate goal: finding Balfour before he eluded her grasp once again.

"Wait." Diamond Tooth called after the tubby tribe leader. "Will your new offer get me to Mictlān?"

"The price is for entry, not the ride." An unnerving smirk crept across the tribal leader's plump cheeks as he fluttered a conniving wink in her direction, his eyes glinting maliciously.

The chief clicked his tongue, communicating in the Nwa-Efé language. At his call, eight alluringly nubile vixens descended the ladder with grace and playfulness, like sprites who had just escaped some enchanted forest. The scantily clad maidens giggled as they approached Diamond Tooth in unison, smiling sweetly as they greeted her.

"My hetaeras will show you to my quarters," the tribal leader said.

The hetaeras were not ordinary whores. These women were erudite and exquisite, and it was a marvel they allowed themselves to live out such debased existences, particularly with the dwarfed Nwa-Efé men who stood scarcely above Diamond Tooth's stature. Diamond Tooth respected the astute mind more than any other possession, and the hetaeras' knowledge was so vast they could have forged any afterlife they desired. Yet, here they were, trudging along the reprobate road of dishonor, penning their own experiences into a ghastly tale with little control over their destinies. It was this enigma that left Diamond Tooth dumbfounded.

2 - ATOP THE XRAFSTAR

The hetaeras swarmed Diamond Tooth, escorting her up a dizzying array of slippery rope ladders, moss-trampled

wooden landings, and grooved stairs carved into the living rock as they scaled the xrafstar's monumental heights. They traipsed up its formidable foot, then its leg, before mounting the sprawling plateau on its back, cloaked in a plush blanket of mosses, ferns, shrubberies, soil, and clay.

An evening chill wrapped around them, an uncanny tranquility that spoke of some forgotten epoch pervading every breath. Geysers spouted devil's water which flowed through the xrafstar's veins and lurked beneath knotted branches.

Diamond Tooth appreciated how its putrid reek saturated the air as the hetaeras guided her into the colossal creature's rambunctious tangle of fur.

A towering verdant wildness, a labyrinthine forest of interlacing twigs, and unkempt shrubbery stretched before them. Abodes of huts and cabins spotted the chaotically flourishing landscape, as though positioned indiscriminately by some unknown force. Gloom pervaded the slim, serpentine passages between them as the group pressed into the unknown. The air seemed still with weighty anticipation; this place was no mere refuge but a strange world where anything might happen.

The tribal leader's colossal abode boasted its majestic presence at the head of the xrafstar, a multi-story domed hut constructed from mud, clay, and the bristles of the beast itself, intricately coiled around its thatch roof, balconies, and terraces.

They brought Diamond Tooth through the house and up to the tribal leader's chamber. Candles illuminated the space, flickering shadows across the walls. The candlesticks were placed strategically around the circular room. Their danger posed no issue despite the risk of flames licking at the walls as the mystical mane of the xrafstar—an ethereal

substance that refused to be consumed by fire—made up the decadent abode.

An ageless woman of mesmerizing beauty circled Diamond Tooth. Her cherry-red hair cascaded down to her waist in luscious locks, and her piercing emerald-green eyes glistened like precious gems as they scanned every inch of Diamond Tooth's body, her soft hands tracing along Diamond Tooth's frame. The chamber echoed with the eerie rhythm of her well-practiced steps.

She carried herself like the madam and was certainly the most graceful and attractive of the lot—Diamond Tooth could feel a spark of contentment blooming inside her as she considered what new delights this journey might bring.

Lust had always been a sin that provided fleeting revitalization. Never as potent as torturing—but better than nothing—sex, when the right partner was involved, could restore her vitality almost as much as murder. And her lumenite had so far reinforced her conclusion, its non-reactivity providing an unimpeded assurance.

The hetaeras sat rigid and transfixed on the madam's every action as though they awaited her bidding.

The madam stood before Diamond Tooth, one arm resting against her waist as she bore down upon Diamond Tooth with palpable intensity. Her fingernails arced, painted to glitzy perfection like glassy claws under the candlelight, adorned with ornamental jewels that glittered with each delicate sway of her hands. As she moved Diamond Tooth's tresses from her visage, the trinkets on her wrists tinkled in tune.

"He has a penchant for the new and exciting," the madam said with a glint in her eye. "But you … there must be something special that he sees in you, even beneath all that grime. Maybe you could dazzle if given half the

chance. One way or another, we'll make you shine." She tapped her manicured finger on the tip of Diamond Tooth's nose.

"I have faith that you'll handle me with the utmost care," Diamond Tooth purred.

The madam coyly cocked her head to one side, letting her smooth, seductive lips curl into a tantalizing smirk. "Let me assure you that you are in skillful hands. My talented ladies will take care of your every need. And you are in for quite a ride."

Diamond Tooth curved her lips into an alluring smirk, arched an eyebrow, and replied in a low, throaty voice, "There's no greater thrill than a challenge." With confident strides, she stepped closer until their forms were chest-to-chest and said in a husky whisper, "Let's not delay any longer, madam..."

"Mnesarete," the madam purred with a slick smile. "I am Madam Mnesarete. Welcome to my parlor of delights. So tell me, who stands before me?"

A low chuckle emerged from Diamond Tooth's throat. "Oh, it depends on who you have the misfortune of asking. Diamond Tooth is the moniker floating around these days. And that name's ill repute brands me as the demon of pain and suffering. But I prefer to think of myself as more of an absolver of inhibitions. That much better suits my true name."

A few of the courtesans exchanged glances, and with a wave of her curly fingernails, Madam Mnesarete commanded her hetaeras to begin their duties.

One courtesan grasped for Diamond Tooth's bagh nakhs. But as soon as she made contact, Diamond Tooth recoiled and secured her hands away from the woman.

All activity in the room ceased as Diamond Tooth drew

out her tiger claws and applied them to the woman's throat.

"I must manicure your nails," the courtesan said, trembling.

"Work around them," Diamond Tooth said icily, watching in satisfaction as the courtesan quivered in fear. "These don't come off."

All the hetaeras scrambled back in horror from Diamond Tooth, except Madam Mnesarete, who remained steadfastly unwavering as she faced the ferocity of Diamond Tooth's wrath.

"Remove them," Madam Mnesarete said, her voice an icy blade. "Or I'll see that you're cast into the depths without delay."

Despite the fleeting rapport that had grown between them, Diamond Tooth detected how serious she was and that she would have no qualms about casting Diamond Tooth into the sand if need be. The deathly undertones were apparent in her fetor, yet beyond her perfume, a barely there suggestion persisted that indicated she didn't wish for this to occur. Still, Diamond Tooth admired the madam's determination to be rid of her and consented to Madame Mnesarete's free access to her bagh nakhs.

The madam's gaze lingered on Diamond Tooth as she peeled the gauntlets away from her ivory palms, bared from their bondage. Their fate now lay in the hands of Madam Mnesarete, who placed them in an accessible corner with great care.

"Here, they shall remain in plain view at all times," Madam Mnesarete said.

Madam Mnesarete's voluptuous form would remain etched into Diamond Tooth's vision like an opulent sculpture for eternity.

The courtesans tentatively stripped Diamond Tooth of her grimy attire and draped it in the far corner of the room beside her bagh nakhs.

A frigid caress erupted at the touch of the astrolabe against her bare flesh, causing her nipples to stand erect.

Diamond Tooth hesitantly unlaced her astrolabe necklace from around her neck, cradling its shimmering opulence between her folded clothes, safeguarding its sanctity.

At last, each hetaera attended to a singular task with varying degrees of diligence, as if Diamond Tooth was their pet project.

One hetaera bathed Diamond Tooth in the sacred water that sprung from the xrafstar's veins. Two others shimmied her into a more daring ensemble akin to their scanty attire. A third toiled with her tresses, curling and looping them around her head. The fourth strumpet artfully painted her visage with shades and hues that revealed her hidden beauty. Each whispered amongst themselves, offering a blessing or good luck charm for Diamond Tooth's future endeavors.

The air outside the decadent hut roiled and vibrated in time with the fiery tempest that loomed above.

Through the window, brilliant flame sparks cascaded across the sky, whirling in a frenzied cyclone of heat and light that battered against the hut's walls.

The commotion outside the chamber grew more turbulent, piquing Diamond Tooth's curiosity, but Madam Mnesarete refused to permit her to rise and inspect what was going on, stating, "Don't disrupt the work of my lovely ladies. It's just a storm. Maybe it's even the sound of the Master himself enjoying the festivities."

A shattering boom shook the air, and sparks of crys-

talline fire shot in all directions. The tumult was almost indescribable, and its echoes extended far beyond the initial blast.

Diamond Tooth rose, eager to see what danger lurked outside. But Madam Mnesarete held her back.

"It'll pass," Madam Mnesarete said. "Sit tight."

An uproar of hoots and hollers joined wild, unbridled cheers as horns blared alongside peals of laughter and frenzied babble, all brewing into a delicious concoction of elated exuberance.

"See?" Madam Mnesarete said.

Diamond Tooth repositioned herself and allowed the hetaeras to complete their preparation.

One courtesan was meant to file and paint Diamond Tooth's fingernails, but she cowered meekly in the far corner, her fingertips tracing the tender crimson indentations on her neck where Diamond Tooth's mighty tiger claws had nicked.

"You frightened her," Madam Mnesarete said. "She's a fresh soul. Recently deceased and just arrived in our care. We collected her at one of Charon's ports not too long before we found you. You're not only her first client, but you may also be her first encounter with a demon."

"Do I not scare you?" Diamond Tooth said, her astral surface prickling with admiration.

She had always respected the resoluteness of a strong-willed soul; few could keep their courage in a demon's presence.

Madam Mnesarete clasped Diamond Tooth's hands in her own, cradling them tenderly as warmth radiated from her soft palms.

"Oh my,"Madam Mnesarete whispered."Your hands have known hard labor. They could polish a diamond. I

think it's best that I take care of your manicure. But first, let's have some fun. We have the best view of the ceremony from our penthouse. Let's have a look, shall we?"

She lured Diamond Tooth to the balcony, gracing her with a gentle smile and a tenderness in her eyes. Taking her by the hand, Madam Mnesarete welcomed Diamond Tooth into the radiance of the firelight.

Diamond Tooth and Madam Mnesarete gazed downward, taking in the sight of the majestic spires that pointed toward the heavens. Nine pyramids were arrayed below them, spanning across the horizon next to the ancient temple holding hundreds of spirits in its courtyard.

From the dizzying heights of the grandiose penthouse balcony atop the mountainous xrafstar's head, Diamond Tooth had a commanding view of the hustle and bustle below.

The aroma of the teeming masses, intoxicatingly pungent from her lofty perch, were amplified by the lumenite embedded in her chest. Unearthly sensations thrummed through her as her lumenite heart beat against her breastplate, as though she were a living conduit of the city's collective energy. It was almost as if a veil had been lifted, granting her access to subtleties and delicate nuances that had until then been hidden.

Diamond Tooth spotted a familiar face lying on a crystal altar atop the temple's rooftop. Her old friend, Cross, whom she hadn't seen in ages. Rays of firelight reflected off his wounded forehead like a crown of diamonds, accentuating the hollowness of his visage.

Diamond Tooth grinned to herself, reflecting on how Cross was always up to his neck in trouble. He surprised and impressed her with his consistent resilience. She thought he would have been burned ages ago with all the

relentless onslaught of monsters that sought his memories. Yet somehow, his head remained attached to his neck. It was almost as though he were immune to their wrath. But if any of his pursuers had employed her services, things would have turned out differently for him.

The people of Amenthes, however, could not seem to grasp that Cross displayed no signs of fear or trepidation despite his capture. Her lumenite-enhanced vision reached across the distance and saw not a single bead of sweat nor an ounce of terror grace his bullet-wounded head; instead, it was contorted in a simulacrum of dread.

His pores spoke even truer than his expression; they reeked with the stench of confidence and assurance. He groaned and cursed, as if facing second death, yet this was artifice.

Diamond Tooth recognized when genuine fear touched a spirit, for she had inflicted that horror upon many. So, knowing when natural fear was absent came effortlessly to her. And it appeared as if she had stumbled upon Cross amid a captivating masquerade. But what sort of play was he engaged in?

All the bestial faces gazed skyward to the temple's summit in respectful silence as the high priest uttered invocations over Cross.

"The past is a sea of blood and death," the high priest said to the onlookers, "and many have drowned within its depths. But with this blade, fashioned from the hairs of the goddess Sia and blessed with all her might, we shall sever the ruach, free the nephesh, and grant the damned a swim through the mind, emotion, and will of the living. May the Great Goddess have mercy on his soul."

The crowd's roar of joy rose and reached a fever pitch,

seeming to bring even the ancient stones of the temple to life.

Madam Mnesarete spoke up with a hint of anger in her voice. "About time they caught The Man Who Remembers. That man thinks he alone deserves to know what's out there in the beyond. But such knowledge should be available to all who seek it, not just some self-appointed guardian of secrets. It's high time we discover the truth behind these myths and legends."

Diamond Tooth let out a throaty laugh as the high priest's arm rose, hoisting a razor-sharp obsidian blade above Cross's throat.

"Is something amusing?" Madam Mnesarete asked.

"Men with blades at their necks don't always lose their heads. Even a miserable soul like that has a guardian angel."

Diamond Tooth drew the nearby crowd's scents and detected another familiar synthetic fragrance beyond Cross's own. Following the stale aroma, she spotted her nemesis, The Raven, soaring out of the courtyard toward the temple's rooftop, draped in black wings with a top hat perched atop her head.

CHAPTER II
A ROPE OF SAND

I - A CATCH

Cross lay helplessly upon the altar, the cold of the crystal beneath him seeping into his ruach. His mind raced with thoughts of a last-second rescue and escape, but they faded until...

A resounding boom clattered through the atmosphere, reverberating against the ancient walls of the majestic temple as if it were a conscious entity, a warning from some incoming deity.

The macuahuitl dropped to the altar next to Cross. A jagged hole pierced through its center, dripping the black ichor of some poor soul.

Cross ran a finger across his neck, feeling for a torn astral surface. The sinew of his neck had been spared. However, the shackles still bound his wrists with their gleaming metal links.

The ash remains of a blighted spirit lay crumbling around the rooftop, seeping away like a foggy memory of an almost-forgotten nightmare.

Ferocious cries rose from the courtyard below like an inferno of insanity. Some voices simmered with animosity, and others writhed with malice. Each blazed with agitation or twisted with hatred toward Cross.

Cross dared not flinch in the face of such fury. He casually shrugged, mocking their anger with his indifference while concealing any outward emotion of awe at his escape. An inner strength surged through him, giving him the confidence and assurance that nothing could divert him from his destiny.

Four deranged jackal men swarmed around Cross, brandishing sickle swords and spears, their muzzles contorted with a maddening rage.

Cross seized the macuahuitl's hilt and launched from the crystalline altar onto the scorching stones of the temple's rooftop. He armed his macuahuitl with an ironclad stance as he sized up each attacker.

The mongrels stepped back and paused briefly before bringing forth their onslaught.

Cross dodged out of range of their thrusting spears and weaved away from every merciless slice of their sickle swords. But no matter how much he evaded them, they kept coming—unyielding and resolute about burning him.

The Raven's rope dart bolted from the heavens like lightning, striking two canine hybrids simultaneously. As they writhed in agony, the blight consumed their fur in a macabre dance.

The last two mutts roared and moved towards the Raven with feral ferocity, primed for battle. She flapped her wings furiously as they advanced.

Cross shouldered through the mongrels. They toppled off the rooftop and tumpled into the gathered crowd below.

Cross hastened toward the ramp leading off the rooftop,

only to find himself face-to-face with several jackal men climbing up to meet him.

The Raven, her wings beating fiercely against the suppressing heat of the blazing sky, extended her arms toward Cross. Her eyes ignited with a fiery passion, looking like some angel of death beckoning him toward an unknown destination.

"Jump!" she said. "I'll catch you."

Cross raced toward the precipice of the rooftop. His boots struck the aged stones as he surged forward. He did not bother to spare a glance, compelled only by his desire for freedom, as he launched himself from the edge of the building, leaving his pursuers behind.

A spear sang through the air, missed Cross's skull, and sailed toward the Raven, his savior.

With one quick shift, the Raven flew out of its trajectory and vanquished Cross's only avenue of escape from the temple grounds.

Cross hurled toward the courtyard below with no means to break his fall. But then a force tugged on the back of his shirt and jerked him upward just before he hit the ground.

He glanced up at his guardian angel's ebony wings battering the balmy air currents, knowing that she—the Raven—had saved him yet again.

They swept above the temple walls until they reached Gimlet, Cross's loyal cornurus companion, beyond the gates.

As the Raven lowered him onto the sand dunes, the shackles at his wrists clanked.

Cross sliced his macuahuitl at the Raven, enraged by her delay in rescuing him.

But she evaded his strike without getting so much as a

single nick from its sharp blade—after all, he never intended to draw ichor or inflict any actual harm on her.

"Such gratitude." The Raven unfurled her midnight feathers and descended onto Gimlet's saddle, each calculated motion declaring her dominance. "Are you coming?"

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Cross swung onto Gimlet's saddle.

The cornurus roared and leaped into action as the jackal men pursued them on all fours like bloodhounds but built like men.

The Raven retaliated, her rope dart crackling with electricity as it spun and whistled through the air. It crafted a ballet of destruction, each movement smiting every jackal who thought to hinder their progress in a blinding burst of light.

2 - THE RIVER NUN

During most waking periods, the smoldering skies crackled gently like the warm embers of a full-bellied hearth on a blessed Christmas morning. But that day, it roiled and screeched with an orchestral vengeance that shook the earth beneath Cross's feet. Brilliant light flashes cascaded through the canopy, sending shockwaves that echoed to infinity in all directions.

A black sun descended from the ashen clouds, reigning unchanged against the inferno-orange horizon, unfaltering in its gaze, never dozing, heeding not the forces of time.

The trio trudged southward, away from the looming eclipse, and not far beyond the borders of Amenthes, they came across a river.

In place of water, the current pulsed with an ethereal glow of blue liquid as if lit from within its depths. Its quality was ordinary and unexceptional by the Underworld's standards, making it stand out oddly among the unnatural and surrealistic rivers he had faced.

Undeterred by its luminescence rising to Gimlet's neckline and the ebb and flow of strange energy, the trio forded the current and trekked through its vastness with relative ease.

Not long after crossing the river, they weaved through a stretch of shadowy, spectral figures. Even in the firelight, their indistinct forms were perceptible—eerie, yet strangely tranquil. The hallowed mist haunting the land wandered around the trio, but none stirred any bothersome desire.

Soon, yet another river snaked before them, a glistening ribbon of silver and an impassable monstrosity.

As Gimlet came to a halt, a peculiar chorus arose from the depths of the river bed. It sounded like tortured souls sang in unison, murmuring and wailing forlornly. Their pitiful cries seemed trapped beneath the shimmering surface, never to be set free. And as if alarmed by the trios' presence at its bank, the river's silver surface rippled with unrest.

Gimlet reared as eerie shapes churned beneath the murky depths.

"I think I'm with Gimlet on this one," Cross said. "I don't think we should go in there. Let's find a way around it."

"We can't," the Raven said. "This is the River Nun. The only way around it is to go back the way we came."

"Well, before we go in, cut these chains off." Cross clenched his bonds in his fists and laid his chafed wrists across each of the Raven's shoulders.

He noticed the weight of his shackles as the metal links of his constraints clinked at her delicate collarbone, a reminder of the darkness that had encircled him for so long. He considered tightening the bonds around the Raven's throat and strangling the afterlife out of her.

"Just sit back." The Raven slowly raised Cross's arms from her shoulders and leaned forward.

She delicately stroked Gimlet's horn like Cross had done to calm the beast. But the Raven could never have the same effect as him when managing this wild creature.

Sure enough, Gimlet rejected the Raven's bid for affection and grew more restless with each grunt and backward step she took away from the river's edge.

Cross chuckled, amused by the Raven's feeble attempts to take control. He shoved the Raven aside, her ebony feathers billowing in protest, and he stroked his calloused hands tenderly along Gimlet's horn, calming its wild spirit until she bowed in tranquil surrender.

"It's alright, Gimlet," he said. "The Raven is the boss. If she says we go through, we go through."

Gimlet propelled them into the tumultuous river of chaos, and they trudged through its churning eddies of spiritual refuse.

Phantasmal arms dragged them beneath the sheen of the mercurial fluid. They sank.

Above them, a discordant symphony of spectral cries echoed from all directions—wispy apparitions careened around them but never ventured beyond the gossamer confines of their riverbed.

Cross closed his mouth and held his breath, fearing these spectral apparitions would climb into his being and contaminate his nephesh.

A chill rushed through him as he considered what they

could mean for his fate, and a fear of the unknown seeped deeper into his ruach with every moment he lingered.

Whispers tangled in Cross's ears, murmuring incoherent babblings—a riot of voices too chaotic for him to discern one from another. It was impossible to hear anything at all.

The Raven faded away from Cross's view.

Gimlet vanished from beneath him.

In an instant, Cross was alone, adrift in a vast abyss of sinister shadows.

His wrist shackles weighed him down like an anchor, hastening his travels deeper into the depths. He descended further and further until he touched the unknown horrors that dwelled below.

An oppressive weight descended upon Cross's neck. The Raven's boots hung at his chest.

He followed the legs up and discovered the Raven perched atop his shoulders. His head was between her legs as she gazed down, her expression mirroring his confusion.

Cross's gaze ascended further to find Gimlet, now riding on the Raven's neck as he carried them both.

He parted his lips to speak, but all that emerged were muted grunts, like those of a cornurus. His words had been robbed from him; instead, his deep baritone came out of the Raven's mouth.

"What the hell is going on?" Cross said through the Raven's lips.

"I don't know," the Raven said through Gimlet's wide mouth. "Just hold on."

Cross's digits itched with a desperate yearning. With trepidation, he extended his hands and encountered succulent sausages sprouting from his palms in place of his fingers.

Despite his awareness of the river's insidious sorcery at work, satiating his rumbling belly overruled logical reasoning. Sausages had been an elusive delicacy since his death. He could not deny the urge to sink his teeth into the tantalizing morsels. He bit down with hunger.

"Ow!" The Raven's voice shot out of Gimlet's mouth.

The Raven recoiled in anguish, her hand shaking as if Cross had inflicted his teeth upon her digits instead of his own.

"Idiot!" Cross said through the Raven.

Cross recoiled, stunned by the strangeness of the Raven having dubbed him an idiot with his voice instead of hers.

Somehow, the cryptic river had caused them to swap voices.

Dissonance resounded within Cross's being as foul and maniacal thoughts invaded his bewildered mind.

His urge to take a knife to his tongue and place it in his ear to hear its sound in another's voice seemed like an ill-conceived endeavor, yet he felt compelled to take action, so with the Raven's hand, he struck himself across the face to wake himself from this bizarre reverie.

Then, just as swiftly, Gimlet pulled them back into reality, and the spiritual sludge receded into the depths of the River Nun, its howling dirge reverberating in Cross's mind as they rode away.

Neither he nor the Raven dared speak of what occurred in the river's depths, silently consenting never to discuss the events that happened to them; they accepted it as something too mysterious ever to understand fully. With one last fleeting glance at the turbulent waters, they galloped away on Gimlet's back to their unknown fate.

3 - DRAGGLES

Gimlet raced through the uncharted for hours until the Raven reined her in on the far edges of Duat, just outside Neter-Khertet.

Stretching out for miles before them stood the colossal remnants of crumbled gates that had once barricaded the realms from one another.

Ahead, a mysterious barrier stood erect between the realms, dividing Duat and Sheol. An ever-shifting veil of haze formed an intangible yet insurmountable wall, a definitive line that promised no escape for those who crossed it. Its infinite presence extended into the searing sky and pierced through the burning flames, solidifying its invincible might. And the blurry atmosphere blanketed the landscape of Sheol like a mirage, creating an illusion that no one could look beyond or around.

The Raven's disheveled, ratty feathers swept across Cross's face as she inclined her head back towards Amenthes. She appeared deep in a trance, her eyes firmly shut, and her head tilted towards the ground as if she was attuned to some far-off sound beyond what Cross could perceive.

"We're being followed," the Raven said.

An eerie calm and silence hung in the air as Cross looked out. The only sounds were the gusts of wind blowing grains of sand into his face, the crackling roar of the flaming sky, and the faint cries of barbots hidden in the black clouds. Their calls echoed off the desolation, its emptiness broken only by the presence of Cross, Gimlet, and the Raven.

Cross squinted across the scorching, barren landscape, searching for any sign of life. Yet, only dried, cracked earth

stretched before them, jagged rocks scattered across the landscape and a dusty haze hung over the parched red dunes in the distance. Heat waves shimmered on the horizon, and the infernos lashed down relentlessly in a cascade of red and orange hues.

"I don't see anyone," Cross said.

"Obviously, they don't aspire to be seen," the Raven said.

"Which direction?" Cross plucked his macuahuitl from its holster on his thigh with grim determination. He hefted the blade in both hands despite his chain-linked wrists, exuding pure confidence even as a great unknown sought to unearth itself before him. "Is it those mongrels again? Squals?"

"No," the Raven said. "Something else."

"What?" he said.

"Not sure," she said. "They've been on our tail since Xibalbá. At least five of them. I tried to catch them when we were in the Viṇsaule canyons, but they kept escaping."

"What do they look like?" he asked.

"I can never get a good look," she said. "They're too fast. Every time I follow their tracks, they seem to disappear all wispy-like."

"The Rudimen?"

"It's not them either."

"Then it must be the draggles."

"Draggles?" she said. "I've never heard of them."

"That's because I made up that name," he said. "I don't know what they are. I've never seen them. But if it's the draggles, don't worry about them."

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked.

"Because they're not following us," Cross said. "They're following me."

"How long have you known?"

"Since before I met you."

"You should have told me."

"You're not particularly chatty."

"Well, now you have my ears," she said. "Why are they following you?"

"I'd like to know that myself," he said. "But I can never get close enough to ask. It's almost like they're more afraid of me than I ever was of them. So, I don't think they'll bother us."

"You don't know for sure."

"All I know is," he said, "they've been following me for a very long time. Probably longer than I've been aware of them. So, if they wanted to burn me, they could have done so dozens of times, and there would have been nothing I could have done about it. The fact that I'm still among the damned tells me they're harmless."

"Even if they're not aggressors," she said, "they could be scouts for someone else or even agents of the Master himself. At the very least, they're a liability."

"You're the liability." Cross thrust his arm against the Raven's back, rumpling her wings with unrestrained ferocity. "You and Ropey."

"Ropey?" she said. "You gave my rope dart one of your stupid nicknames?"

"I have a bone to pick with you two," he said. "I wanna know what happened back there in Amenthes. I was this close to losing my head to my own blade." His hands tightened around the smooth wooden hilt of the macuahuitl.

The sharp obsidian blades glinted in the flickering light of the torched sky.

"When we swindled the squals," the Raven said, "I had to wait for you to get close enough to me to toss you the

blade so you could protect yourself. This time, I figured I'd put the macuahuitl a bit closer to you early on. And it worked."

"I'm not talking about that," he said. "I already guessed that was your plan. I wanna know what took you so long."

"Oh, that," she said. "I ran into an old friend and lost track of time. But you're still all in one piece."

Cross's fingertips dug deep into her ragged and tattered plumage, clenching her to him with a violent tug that sent a rending tear echoing around them.

He could sense her slight frame rise and fall rhythmically beneath his touch, his grip intensifying with each inhale she took.

"I told you," he whispered in her ear. "Nobody's late when my neck's on the line! I felt the blight crawling up my back. You know what that's like?"

"I haven't had the pleasure," she said.

"You better hope you never do. When the blight bites your ass, it really sinks its fangs."

Cross slowly unraveled his clasp, relinquishing his grasp with a ghostly aura of warmth that lingered on his fingertips as he withdrew them from the Raven's feathers.

A gentle whisper circulated as loose plumes floated away like a flurry of snowflakes drifting from a barren tree.

"You're right," the Raven said. "Thirteen is a sacred number."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Cross said.

"I don't think you'll ever be worth more than thirteen objects," she said. "And too many spirits know about you now. More and more of them will come for your head, and one of these days, they're gonna get it, even if they have to go through me."

"What are you saying?" Cross asked.

"I'm saying, let's not both lose our heads." The Raven's wings thundered through the air like a turbulent hurricane.

With one savage flap, they struck Cross off the saddle and cast him into the coarse grains of sand.

His macuahuitl flung from his hands with such force that it sailed several feet away, spinning and slicing the air with its deadly edges.

"I'll hold on to my objects," the Raven said atop Gimlet's saddle, "and you can keep whatever it is you already have, especially that macuahuitl, in case you decide to fall on it."

"You filthy, double-crossing bitch!" Cross crawled through the course, granular sand, to reclaim his macuahuitl. He lunged forward, finally grasping it. "I should have strangled you when I—"

The Raven's bewitched rope dart slithered its head towards Cross, daring him to complete his threat before it impaled itself through his very essence. The dart's glimmering sheen sparkled with an arcane vitality, its frigid metal exuding an uncanny chill as it swayed from side to side, scrutinizing Cross with the focus of a thousand watchful eyes.

"Paradise lies in that direction," the Raven said, her weathered top hat tilted eastward beyond the wan veil. "But you'll have to brave Sheol. If luck is on your side, it may take nine periods of sleep to reach."

"Or eternity," he said. "They say people go in that desert and never return."

"Then you can be sure no one will ever have access to your memories. That's what you wanted, right?"

The rope dart weaved itself around Cross, its thick and weighty coils forming a frigid and unyielding prison around him. Its coarse fibers dug into his astral surface as it coiled

and fastened itself to his ruach. The braid of knots tightened with each labored breath he took, suffocating his ruach until he could no longer shift.

"You best watch your back," Cross said. "I don't care how far away you are; I'll find you. I'll hunt you to every plane of existence."

"Promise?" The Raven's dark eyes gleamed with sinister amusement as she glared down upon Cross. She appeared to be gloating almost, reveling in her control over him. "I like being found," she said. "But you gotta lose me to find me."

The rope hoisted Cross off the ground with overwhelming might, propelling him into the fiery heavens like a leaf in a gusty gale.

"You can't do this, Raven!" Cross thrashed and kicked, his limbs contorting to free himself from the rope dart's unforgiving grasp.

His muscles strained. Every sinew of his being protested against the binds that held him in check. Every strand of the rope cleaved through his astral surface like a serrated blade, shattering his resolve with every lurching jerk.

"You soiled dove!" he said. "If I ever catch you, I'll pluck all your filthy feathers off and skin you alive, you rotten snatch! I'll rip your wings off, fry them in the pits of Hell, and feed them to the hellhounds!"

"I sure am going to miss your vivid imagination," the Raven said.

"I'll be seeing you and Ropey soon," he said. "Very soon, you filthy split!"

"So long, Cross."

The rope unraveled like a whip, propelling Cross away from it with a dizzying spin.

A flurry of wind brushed past his cheeks, and he plum-

meted into the sandy ground below with an earth-shattering splash.

He rose, and in an instant, Gimlet and the Raven had dissipated into nothingness.

In truth, it was he who had faded from their sight. As if a curtain had been drawn between him and them, the arcane sorcery of Sheol rendered him invisible to anything beyond its veil. The Raven could be standing on the brink of the realm directly in front of him, yet he'd never have a clue, for it was a wretched sorcery that only allowed those inside to see out, not vice versa.

An endless vista of golden sand sprawled beyond him—a never-ending sea of featureless terrain stretched far beyond eternity. The air lay still and silent, an eeriness undisturbed for ages. Grains creaked as they shifted beneath him, scratching his boots like whispers hidden beneath the dust. The horizon shimmered in the scorching heat while dark clouds rolled in from miles away. Fiery tongues lapped at the sand, illuminating its infinite expanse but providing little in the way of landmarks besides its own twinkling reflection. No matter where his gaze roamed, he could only make out an uninterrupted stretch of sand and the flaming sky.

4 - SHEOL

Cross wedged the macuahuitl between his knotted knees and rasped the cuffs across its razor-sharp obsidian blades. After what felt like an age, he finally severed his bonds. However, the effort left him depleted, exacerbated by the infernal heat.

The torridity was typical for the Underworld, except Sheol reigned as the most scorching realm he had ever encountered. The land blazed hotter than a brothel on nickel night. There was no reprieve from suffering as each inspired gasp of air merely disappeared into the furnace's atmosphere.

Cross prayed that the Great Goddess would help him break free before he remembered Cottontail was more likely to overhear his supplication than Magna Mater.

He could not fail her; he refused to surrender his promise. He intended to keep it, no matter what. Though he understood the Great Goddess might not help him, Cross was sure she hadn't trapped him within this realm without believing he could conquer it and protect Cottontail.

His old friend Sinuhe often reminded him that the Underworld had a curious way of tormenting a soul emotionally as much as physically, and its Master only relinquished the hold it had on a soul when he finished with them. If the Master declined to burn a soul, they wouldn't burn; if he wanted them out, they were let out. But he never divulged the hour, location, or true motivations. His interests were as elusive as a wisp of smoke, just out of reach.

But Cross declared his own terms. If the Underworld and its Master never rested, neither would he. If the Underworld and its Master never cooled down, neither would he. He vowed to beat them at their own game.

Cross struggled to his feet, summoning every ounce of grit he could muster. Despite his exhaustion and weariness, he staggered through the desert beneath the sweltering, fiery sky.

One foot at a time. Hour after hour. Left, right, march like a soldier. He'd find a way out, even if it took him a

thousand years. He had always persevered when others despaired. He had endured while all around him perished. That would never change.

An old spiritual his mother had taught him centuries ago back at the plantation came to mind: "Motherless Child." That song had been his anchor throughout so much hardship and pain in life … and afterlife. More than anything else, it gave him the strength to carry on.

He hummed it to himself, and the song held his essence aloft and kept him proactive as he stumbled over dune after dune, only to confront yet more of the ceaseless sea of dust.

5 - MAMA

Heat seared Cross's neck like the claws of a vengeful devil digging in, and his knees buckled beneath him.

Curses escaped his lips as he unleashed an agonizing roar of anger toward the fiery heavens as if to challenge them.

In retaliation, dark clouds rained down hot, red liquid that stained his astral sruface and clothes with the blood of life, seemingly mocking him for what he had lost and emphasizing his perdition.

In acceptance and defiance, Cross spread his arms wide, extending out his tongue to welcome the drops of crimson liquid pouring onto him, savoring its disgusting copper-like taste and laughing maniacally into the abyss.

"Keep it coming!" Cross hollered against the clouds as laughter rumbled through him. "You ain't so tough!"

The shimmering outline of his mother coalesced from the ether into a tangible figure—a woman clothed in the

sun, full of grace, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve celestial bodies on her head. Her spirit was as perfect as a sculpted statue, glimmering with an eerie luminescence that was equal parts captivating and unnerving. She radiated an inherent brilliance more resplendent than any spirit he had ever encountered in the Underworld as if she were an emissary sent from Heaven.

The crimson rain intensified, the large drops hammering down on him, coating his garments in a thick veneer of sticky, rust-hued liquid.

But miraculously, the downpour parted around his mother's holy halo like the Red Sea, as if she existed only in a dream of an aspirational reunion. Her transcendent grace was something too timeless for the Underworld to stain.

Her sacred light set the depths of Cross's nephesh ablaze, and without ever having to touch her physically, her love held him close—swaddling him in its warm embrace—as she used to when he was a child, a love that transcended all dimensions of reality. It cascaded around him like rays of sunlight and embraced every aspect of his being. Her tranquility settled into his core and tamed his beastly spirit, calming it with the same serenity he had felt in Paradise before its gates were shuttered behind his back.

But the Master lies. The Underworld was false. And Cross was now baptized in its blood.

He'd not encountered a single soul from his former life since his death, and he had stopped praying to reunite with loved ones after spirits used those appeals against him. In the Underworld, such deceptions were all too familiar—evil entities masquerading as beloved figures or enemies cloaked as cherished friends. Seeing his mother in this place of all places had to be some sadistic trick employed by the Underworld. It was a wretched ruse, an insidious jest

meant to buoy him only to trample his hopes beneath their heels.

Yet no matter how much of an illusion this must indeed have been, seeing her again after all these years felt like a balm on his broken heart. But as much as it tugged at his heartstrings and instilled a desperate wish that the apparition before him was his mother, he could not surrender to her presence; he loathed the Underworld for its vile deception.

"My apologies for the rain." Her words echoed with celestial eloquence, like it emenated from beyond the stars.

The sky's embers crackled like glimmering cymbals in a heavenly composition. Ebony plumes of smoke filled the air with holy incense. The desert sands rang with an ethereal chime, and the consecrated blood rained down in glorious harmony like a choir of respect for the words she shared.

"I'm soaked in blood right now because of you?" Cross asked.

"Inadvertently," she said. "The Master is impotent to assail me, so he's venting his vexation upon you. I simply express my regrets on his behalf."

Cross's suspicions of her presence blazed to life as soon as she spoke of the Master.

He ran the obsidian blades of his macuahuitl along the tender astral surface of his own throat, daring her to challenge him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Let's see if you can get my memories before I spill them onto the bloody sand."

"You can't, Charles."

"Don't call me that," he said. "And I'll do whatever the hell I please."

"I'm not implying you won't succeed," she said. "You

can very well blight your soul if you choose to do so. But that would surely bring down the wrath of your father, who has boasted of high expectations for you. It would be enough to scuttle any hope of achieving what he has planned for you."

The disclosure of his alleged father's ambitions sparked intrigue.

Cross eased the macuahuitl away from his neck with aching deliberation, but did not sheathe it back into its makeshift holster wound around his leg.

"What business does the Master have with my father?" he asked.

"The two of them never truly got along," she said. "Their relationship is an enduring and arduous tapestry of pain and heartache."

"But you told me I ain't got no daddy," he said, the words coming out as if they were being dragged by an anchor from his soul.

"I said you were immaculately conceived. That means—"

"I know what it means," he said. "I just always assumed you told me that because you either didn't know who he was or maybe you knew him and were ashamed of him."

His mother's eyes twinkled with elation, and her face reflected her inner joy. A brilliant light emanated from her face, and her lips curled into an ethereal smile, like she had been born anew, young and vibrant as the start of a new year. A halo of scintillating white light burst from the top of her head, outshining the flames in the sky and growing brighter and brighter until it enveloped her entire figure and was the most brilliant thing in all creation.

"I am madly and crazily in love with Him and take tremendous pride in being his maiden." Her voice reverber-

ated throughout the Underworld like a chorus of angelic arias. Each syllable carried a gentle breeze of ethereal melody that filled every corner and crevice of Sheol with its celestial song of echoing beauty. "Thou who art united to Him, become one ruach with him. He who upholds the universe, within whom and through whom are all things. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth."

"That must be why you get to dress up like the Virgin Mary and visit your dear old son at your convenience."

She gave Cross a curious look and asked, "There is much yet to learn about your father. Would you like to know more about Him?"

Cross paused, his mind grappling with the prospect of learning more about the enigmatic father he'd never known. He had spent an eternity imagining this moment, yet he could not bring himself to utter a word. He held his breath and stared into the luminous eyes of his mother, an invisible force drawing him in.

"No," he said. "That ship sailed ages ago. I stopped caring about him when I was alive. And you've just said everything I needed to know about him."

He shuffled past his mother's fading silhouette, struggling against the mushy, crimson-tainted sands, the smell of iron clinging to every grain and clumping to his boots. He swallowed hard, not daring to look back as he trekked through the charnel landscape rife with death and despair.

And though he had passed by his mother moments earlier, she remained a few paces ahead as if the space between them was suspended in time. His feet were rooted to the spot, heavy with damp sand and dread as her presence persisted before him.

"Now, I'm even more determined to get to Paradise," he

said. "When I drink from the river Lethe, you'll be the first memory I purge."

"How can you say such a thing?" she asked.

"Because you abandoned me."

His mother tightened her lips, her expression dropping in resignation as if the words he had uttered had already been spoken long before they had ever reunited.

His frustrations hung in the air between them. He could feel his mother's eyes like a weight on his shoulders, expecting the outburst waiting to be unleashed.

She sighed and spoke softly, her voice full of emotion. "I know it appears that way, but I never left you."

Her voice's melodic and harmonic beauty tugged at his nephesh with its inviting and hopeful crescendo. The consonants and vowels around it bled into one another until they were indiscernible. Even the weather patterns gathered into a jewel-like ooze that reflected the richness of the tone, weaving a tangible form around the words and forming a gradient that caught and held the sound in a crystalline sheath for an eternity.

Cross had never heard such a sound before, yet he knew it had always been in him—like a forgotten limb newly awoken. And despite the strangeness of the effect, it was neither unpleasant nor beautiful; it naturally occupied space with a sense of purpose and belonging.

"Through birth and through death," she said. "In trial and difficulty, especially in places where the senseless logic of violence is most ferocious, I have always been with you, smiling on your nephesh, offering you refuge in my arms and the tenderness of my embrace. But I am unseen. Not by choice. But for the belief of worthiness you hold about yourself. Even now, you deny the mercy of my presence."

Cross brushed away the wetness of his tears, leaving

vivid blood smears on either side of his hands. "It must be real nice up there or wherever the hell you came from, Mama. But if you're supposed to be some beacon of hope to get me through this, you're about three hundred years and thousands of prayers too late."

"You need not bear your burdens alone," she said.

"That doesn't mean I need your help."

She shook her head, the sadness in it radiating. "No," she said, her voice barely audible. "Though you may not feel it now, you have an undeniable need for companionship. And you understand on a deeper level that one day you will require the aid of others. I can only pray that at that moment, you will have given them a reason to support you."

"I've been on my own since I was nine," he said. "I can take care of myself. I always have. I always will." He marched through her, undeterred by her presence.

But she reappeared in his path yet again. Each stride he took never drew him away from her, as if the Underworld had seamlessly returned him to his starting position.

"You were always so strong," she said. "Stronger than your father and much stronger in ways you don't realize. But you need not wear that brave façade all your days. For such is the divine Will that it's a loud, powerful call emanating from deep within the silent soul failing strength."

"I remember the last thing you said to me," Cross said. "Before you left me, you promised me happiness in the afterlife."

"Be not discouraged," she said. "You are highly favored. Your hour has not yet come. Have recourse that promise has yet to be fulfilled and shall be. Your father will answer before long. Do whatever he tells you."

"Am I here in the Underworld because of my father?"

"I'm afraid that's a complicated quandary with a convoluted explanation you will find unsatisfactory."

"Try me. I've got time."

"Not as much as you reckon." She sighed and looked away, as if trying to steel herself against what she was about to say. "Events have been set afoot, leading powerful communities into reckless and unpredictable acts. The hunt for your memories is the least of it. Long-standing rivals have formed unexpected alliances in a desperate bid for survival. The climate is brimming with uncertainty and confusion. No one can foresee what is coming."

"Not even the big man in the sky," Cross said, his voice a mere whisper in the oppressive air.

"That is an entirely different tale," she said with a tone both grim and resigned. "And If I'm being sincere, my fear has never been so strong. You must flee this place before it's too late."

"You know the way out?" he asked.

"What limited wisdom I can offer would do little to aid you," she said sorrowfully. "For the only route to exodus is inward." She reached out to him, her eyes glimmering with compassion and understanding.

He raised his hand to hers, poised for a moment that could make all sins vanish, allowing him the solace he desperately sought.

Darkness pummeled his burdened mind, a swirling vortex of cursed and blessed memories. The unwelcome reminiscence surged to the forefront of his consciousness, and he struggled against it.

He loathed succumbing to the re-experience of affairs before his death because his memories were relentless, compelling his mind against his will to travel back through

time to his former life for as long as the length of the memory demanded. Often, they persisted for hours, sometimes days, and even weeks at a time.

But in the Underworld, only a moment would elapse, and spirits around him appeared none the wiser as he slipped deeper into the recesses of his mind.

While ensnared in the tight embrace of these memories, every texture his former ruach had connected with leaped from the past into the present. Every emotion that once coursed through him was still as alive as ever, and every smell that his nostrils had inhaled was still tangible in his recollection.

But his present will was powerless to intervene; he could not utter a single word as his past self, had no influence over his previous decisions, and had no control over his erstwhile thoughts. He relived it all with acute vividness and, in real-time, entirely at the mercy of his own mind. His former life was beyond his command, dominating him like water crashing against rocks.

These memories used to bring solace during the tumult of his afterlife in the Underworld; now, they were just painful reminders of all he had lost. Nothing but the bittersweetness of them remained, propelling him toward an underworld-weary acceptance that tomorrow didn't exist because eternity was an endless day.

If only he could have made it to the River Lethe, he would have had the power to erase all memory and keep existing in ignorant bliss. It was ironic to think that those without memories were the ones who were truly lucky in this realm. But then again, his memories prevented him from being burned—a gift and a curse, as they were also why every soul wanted nothing more than to end his afterlife.

But as his mother's touch had somehow orchestrated this particular recollection, it was evidently of considerable gravity. Thus, he permitted himself to endure the flashback and bear the burden of the trace it would undoubtedly leave, desperate for the answers this memory might offer.

CHAPTER 12
SOUL MATES

1 - THE HANDMAID

Nine-year-old Charles had listened intently for weeks as hushed stories of a "Moses" helping slaves escape circulated quietly among the plantation. Still, the anticipation frazzled his nerves.

He had expected the evening they revolted and planned for the rifle shots, screams of anguish, chaos, and commotion—yet nothing could have prepared him for the heartbreaking cries of death, surrender, and recapture. He had lain awake at night preparing himself for such tragedies, yet he still could not hold back his tears when faced with reality. Until this moment, he'd never known genuine sorrow until he watched it unfold before his eyes and felt it swell deep within his chest.

Charles and his mother evacuated northward after the insurrection, taking refuge from the hellish hounds in the frigid forests.

They waded through murky marshlands, croaking with frogs and serenaded by crickets' lullaby of peril as the

stench of sulfur burned their nostrils. The sinister night clung to the cold air like a damp blanket as they ventured into the soggy wilderness, drenched in fear-laced sweat.

Mama clutched Charles in her spindly arms, shielding him from the elements and buffering his teeming emotions.

Although he was too small to reciprocate in kind, Charles wrapped his tiny arms around her, hoping to bring her some solace from the cold. Though his narrow frame could not shelter her shivering body.

"Don't have to worry about m-me," she whispered sweetly into his ear, her cracked lips quivering against his head. "I'm doing just f-fine. I think of Paradise, and it warms my heart—a land where the sun never ceases to shine, where all your needs are met, and where work is not too much. It's a place where everything good in this world abounds. Peace, freedom, and only one master who rules with love."

Mama's soothing words flowed like honey from her tongue. A serenity descended upon Charles, and his worries vanished. The dream-like vision enraptured him as she spun the tale through her chattering teeth.

He longed to know more about this wondrous place that held her heart. The mere idea of Paradise was like a threadbare quilt stretching across his mother's form, shielding her against the frigid world. If all he could provide in a world so desolate and unyielding were these moments of respite, then he would offer them for as long as they offered solace to his beloved mother.

"Where is Paradise?" he asked.

"It lies far away, far beyond our reach." She cast her eyes to the sparkling night sky, and her withered finger pointed towards a single star, burning brighter than all the rest. "Observe that one shining star, the brightest of them

all; it's known as the North Star. Follow its guidance, and you shall eventually find yourself at the gates of Paradise. Keep your eyes trained upon it and never let it out of sight."

The silence that followed was heavy with a palpable absence of hope. Paradise was nothing more than a fantasy—an idyllic dream that could never be realized in their cruel reality. But he knew better than to speak it aloud.

Charles heeded his mother's words, gazing up at the star every night as they traversed hills and over meadows.

Moonlight illuminated their path, and soon the whiteness of the waxing orb cast its celestial haze over storefronts and horse-drawn wagons that lined the main road of a small town fraught with dangers at every corner.

The arid air was like parched earth, unyielding to the rains for months. Peppering this stillness was a concoction of aromas: burning wood and pitchy torches, hay from horse stalls, the distinct muskiness of a thousand animals all mushed together—like wool and grease—and beneath this heady aroma was a sour note of distress from its inhabitants.

Weary figures watched horses tethered about on rails outside buildings made of weathered wood and timber, each glowing with lanterns.

Ominous gatherers carried oil-burning torches that sputtered a smoky orange light across the street and deepened the shadows of the building's eaves.

Armed men bore shotguns and rifles, standing vigilant watch over this desolate habitat—an assemblage of daunting individuals whose garb matched their imposing stature. Their patchwork of leather straps, buckles, and fraying rags draped over their bodies like grizzly pelts, the scars visible on exposed skin reminding one of their sordid past.

Mama fearlessly slunk through the shadows, armed with nothing but her courage, leaving Charles to hide in suspense at the edge of town.

The hard dirt ground thudded underneath the boots of roughnecks, leather-clad men who could be trusted to incite heinous violence.

Time inched by interminably until, at last, Mama returned with what little food she could gain, yet not enough sustenance to satiate Charles's hungry stomach.

Before he took his first bite, he offered Mama a bite of the half-eaten scraps of unknown feed.

Mama shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

Mama was undoubtedly famished, and she had taken an unimaginable risk to get a meager morsel that could not feed them both. Now Charles felt he bore responsibility for her inability to silence the roaring emptiness in her stomach.

Mama's gentle, calloused hand was like a balm on his skin, wiping away his tears in a comforting embrace that only a mother could provide. Her healing caress against his cheek sent ripples of warmth through his body, soothing his sorrow and giving him the strength to carry on. Despite the exhaustion and hunger she must have felt in her bones, Mama's touch was nothing but a source of unconditional love and security, a stark contrast to the chill of the night air, which reminded Charles that even in this grim moment, they were still there for each other.

"Rejoice!" Mama said. "Turn your sorrows into joy and soften the hearts of evil men! Anu will answer before long. Do whatever he tells you. I do not promise happiness in this world but in the next."

Charles inclined his head, and Mama drank in the sight

of him with a lingering gaze as if etching every line of his face into her memory.

Then, Mama stepped out onto the dusty road, passing right before the men with guns, each footstep an anthem of strength and courage.

"Hey you!" a man yelled, his voice thundering through the cold air like a crack of lightning. "Hold it right there!"

Mama ignored him and charged forward down the road.

A horde of armed men descended upon her from all directions, their weapons trained on her as they moved in.

A wall of onlookers sprang up around Mama, forming an impenetrable barrier that blocked Charles's view of her.

Suddenly there was a sickening thump as if a body had been thrown to the ground. Mama's scream pierced the air.

Thumps and scrapes rang out—the sounds of his mother thrashing against her captors amidst their frenzied cheering.

A whip cracked in vicious repetition, echoing Mama's cries of agony.

Charles's trembling hands clamped down on his ears, futilely trying to silence the bloodcurdling shrieks of Mama.

The merciless lashings rang out like thunder, each one tearing into Charles' already-tarnished innocence.

The crowd roared with a bloodlust that could only be quenched by the misery of others as if they were mere savages at a feast. For them, this was entertainment; for Charles, it was hell.

The scene's horror was too much to bear, and Charles felt himself slipping into madness.

Visions of bone arenas and fields of severed heads impaled upon stakes beneath blazing inverted pyres

flashed through his mind as Mama's pain and agony continued unabated.

For a moment, he wondered how such cruelty could exist in the world, but then he knew this was just another facet of humanity's dark side.

Silence descended upon the town like a heavy blanket, and Charles mustered the courage to peer into the crowd of people.

His heart swelled with an inexplicable joy; his mother still lived. But the happiness was fleeting—it soon became a gaping chasm of shock and horror.

Beneath a tree, she stood motionless next to a horse. A thick rope snaked around her neck like a serpent.

There was no struggle left in her—no fight or defiance—just an eerie calm that radiated off her like a ghostly aura. Her open palms rested at her sides as if she had accepted her fate and was ready for whatever came next.

Charles's heart pounded in his chest at the sight. His breath became stuck in his throat, paralyzed by what he saw in front of him.

Her solemn eyes locked onto Charles's—not with fear or relief, but with eyes that seemed to hold some dark knowledge he could not comprehend.

Suddenly, the heavens opened, and rays of holy light poured out, brightening the area around her as if to reveal the mob's true wicked essence.

A collective gasp resounded throughout the crowd, and they shielded their eyes from the light.

Thunder boomed, and lightning flashed through the sky, arching with power. An earthquake trembled beneath the ground, rippling across the land like an oppressive wave. Hail pounded the town from above like drums of doom, raining judgment from on high.

Yet Charles and his mother appeared to have been the only souls spared from the storm's fury.

"Behold!" Mama said to the onlookers. "I am the handmaid of the guardian of the heavens; let it be done to me according to your word! For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. A messenger and a word of his power He conveyed to me, and a spirit from him. And I leave My Heart surrounded with thorns, with which ungrateful men pierce it at every moment by their blasphemies and ingratitude. Seven swords pierce my heart, and I come at last to the fullness of his grace. Nulla si crea! Nulla si distrugge! Tutto si trasforma!"

The horse lurched forward, tugging at the rope, pulling Mama up and suspending her mid-air, the noose tightening around her neck.

No hint of turmoil stirred within her as she hung, her frame rigid and immovable. A mask of calm settled across her features, her gaze unyielding and vigilant despite the cruelty of her captors. Her expression was eerily composed, almost tranquil—defiance of death's embrace that a single emotion crossing her face dared not break.

Mama's lack of struggle stilled the gathering and silenced their chatter. Until the end, she remained steadfast in her stony silence, her unwavering hazel eyes conveying a bitter resolve to preserve her dignity.

And when the flames responsible for awakening Mama's spirit flickered out, an unseen force extinguished every torch around town at once.

The heavens then sealed shut their gates, and the holy light withdrew, plunging the town into impenetrable darkness like a black blanket of sorrow.

A lone rumble of thunder and a diminishing spark of

lightning died away into nothingness until all that remained was a still calm.

As if made of glass, the hail on the ground shattered into an infinite number of minuscule drops that melted into pools in the mud.

Even in such a dire situation, Mama's spirit remained unconquered. Her inert body hung lifelessly from its rope in slow perpetuity, suspended in time and space, before a hushed assembly. Her tranquil countenance was empty of life; her face was a ghostly mask of eerie stillness, etched with an unearthly calm. The eyes that should have glimmered with emotion were absent, staring off into the unknown abyss without a flicker. That body no longer contained his mother. She was gone.

Charles shuddered as a chill seeped through him. The world around him spun and disintegrated into a dense abyss, leaving only a sea of glimmering sparks in its wake. Nothing appeared tangible, and yet he sensed a presence near him. He tried to turn his head away from Mama, but something inside prevented him from doing so. His body seemed tethered to hers, as if by an invisible string.

Tiny hands clasped him, urging him to drop low behind a wagon. He obeyed and beheld a girl his age enveloped in a magnificent gossamer fabric. Her eyes burned with angelic grace and benevolence, their luster penetrating his innermost being with tenderness and mercy. The radiance in her gaze was like an illuminated path of hope through the depths of despair—a guiding North Star that beckoned him from the darkness.

"My name's Kate," she said, her voice gentle, a whisper in the darkness. "What's your name?"

"Charles." His name slipped like grains of sand from his

lips, so faint it was almost invisible against the darkness of night as he slowly recovered his long-forgotten voice.

"Are you in trouble?" she asked.

Charles swiped at his tear-streaked face and gestured towards his mother's lifeless body, cruelly suspended from the rope.

"Oh." Kate's mouth fell agape as she regarded the ground silently as if unable to find her words. Eternity stretched on until she broke the silence. "I'll go get my father. He'll know what to do. You stay here. Keep low."

Kate darted around the wagon, and she returned with her father in what felt like a moment.

Unlike the brutes who had so heinously hung Mama, Kate's father cut an eerie figure of distinguished poise. He was impeccably groomed, his jawline sharp, and he seemed well-traveled as if he'd glimpsed a thousand sights not yet imagined by the folk of these parts.

He swept his derby hat from his head, revealing a mop of unruly hair that cascaded to his forehead. He reverently held the accessory close to his heart, its brim cradled in his fingers. A star-like glint shimmering from his ring pierced the stygian darkness as if it contained a power beyond Charles's imagining within its depths.

"My deep and heartfelt sympathy with you," the gentleman said, "under the shocking circumstances of your present dreadful misfortune."

The gentleman's kind words were cut short by the stomp heavy boots against the ground, closing in on them.

Kate's father whirled around to confront the looming steel muzzle of a rifle, pointing straight at him.

"What you doin' with that nigger?" the rifleman said.

Kate yanked Charles close protectively with a fervent

grip, twining their fingers into a single being. Her tender embrace brought him solace in the face of peril, providing strength for him and assuring him that he would not be alone against the threat of the rifleman.

"He's with us," Kate said.

The rifleman scrutinized Charles for a beat before angling his gaze to regard Kate's father with a hardened expression. "Is that so, Mister?" he said. His glower could have cut through iron, and the air seemed almost solid with stillness.

Kate's father made no move as the rifle barrel quivered before him. He straightened his derby hat atop his head in a studied motion, then fixed the gunman with a gaze that suggested the rifleman bore little consequence. Aged eyes, narrowed in reproachful scorn, had likely seen much worse than what this mere miscreant had brought about.

A portly, bearded man trundled towards them, his mass quaking in distress with each stride. His hefty boots pounded the ground as he bellowed at the rifleman, his resounding voice reverberating off the wooden buildings and commanding the attention of all those nearby. "Lower your weapon, you buffoon!"

The heavy man drew near, his heaving breath echoing in the night as he lumbered across the dusty path. His worn coat and broad-brimmed hat billowed in an unseen wind. A wild beard spilled from his chin and crawled onto his cheeks while thick, bristling eyebrows twitched with each word spoken. "Do you have any idea who you're addressing?"

"I'm addressing a runaway and his possible aide," the rifleman said.

"You, sir, are a stranger to these parts," the portly fellow

said with an air of distinction. "Yet, you seem to have little interest in making a peaceful resolve, and I fear your presence has already exacted too much of a toll upon my good neighbors. I daresay it was unwise of me to grant you such clemency as to enable you to apprehend your criminal culprits. I must insist that any further disruption to my town's people, and more notably, any defamations made against my good fellow and his daughter, shall not be accepted. Moreover, if they attest to this lad's innocence, then I shall accept their word as gospel. If you are dissatisfied with my ruling, take it directly with me. Are we clear on this matter?"

The rifleman's grip on the gun tightened as he glanced down at Charles with hatred and fear. He heaved a deep breath and raised his weapon to his shoulder. "Apologies, Mr. Rowings."

"No need to apologize to me," Mr. Rowings drawled. "Direct your regrets toward Miss Katie, who was distastefully alarmed by your ungentlemanly behavior."

The rifleman's face was a stony mask, his gaze as solid and inflexible as forged steel. His lips were taut but relaxed as he beheld Kate's trembling, petite frame. A barely perceptible nod of his head, a sign of understanding and regret, silently passed between them. "My apologies, Little Miss."

"And apologize to Charles, too," Kate said.

The man's face contorted in knotted fury and indignation, his body stiffening into a rigid silhouette as if an electric storm cloud of rage gathered at its core, bubbling and seething with anger until it could contain no more. A grumbling snarl of bitter dissatisfaction rumbled from deep within his throat as he stomped away without apologizing,

his movements jerky and erratic—like the sudden release of a caged lion. Pebbles flew up beneath his boots as he stormed off into the night, each heavy stomp sending out waves of discontentment that echoed throughout town. His back was unbending and straight as he strode onward, a thick air of unrestrained animosity growing heavier with every step taken and intensifying further as he faded away.

Mr. Rowings ushered the four of them to the side of the road, stroking his beard as he imparted his grave concerns to Kate's father. "Fortune was on our side this time, Samuel. Pray this endeavor proves its worth."

Kate's father descended to Charles's level, their eyes meeting. "Katie here tells me your name is Charles," the gentleman drawled. "However, might I ask… Charles what? Pray tell me your surname, if you may."

Trembling, Charles clammed up, the words welling within him yet locked away by a mysterious force he was unable to break free from. Even if he desired to, the fear that had taken hold of him was so powerful that all he could muster was his heavy breathing, as if the surrounding air suffocated his voice.

The gentleman's face softened as he spoke. "I cannot fathom the hardship you've just endured." He paused, his brow furrowing in thought. "Verbalizing the anguish of my soul for yours is a task beyond me. Were these men of reason, they would have delivered you and your mother back to your master or perhaps auctioned you off to the highest bidder. However, these self-righteous rabble-rousers care not for the cost of recompense—only punishment. And they'd just as soon hang Mr. Rowings and me for assisting runaways such as you." He sighed heavily, his voice filled with conviction. "But if you can confirm your last name, we'll discern who we're up against, and I can

transport you to safety. Somewhere far away from here. Do you understand?"

"Charles." He inhaled deeply. "Charles Hill."

Kate's father peered up at his friend, Mr. Rowings, and they exchanged a meaningful stare that spoke of generations of history between them. Then the man redirected his gaze to Charles, smiling warmly as if to bathe him in a never-ending beam of cordiality. "I'm Carson. Samuel Carson, at your service. Now, shall we be on our way?"

2 - THE PITS OF HELL

As Charles clasped Mr. Carson's hand, Cross's footstep sank into a wasteland of flame.

A billowing river of fire sliced through the craggy terrain, scarred with ragged, bowl-shaped cavities, their depths as immeasurable as the night sky on the prairie. Some craters could swallow a whole town of vigilantes, and some were no bigger than a modest cabin. All these fuming pits belched and spewed out menacing chains of lava that blazed against the backdrop of an ebony sky.

It appeared the memory of Mr. Carson had ferried Cross out of the desolate desert of Sheol and into the deathly embraces of the pits of Hell, the rightful resting place for his doomed soul.

The acrid odor of burning flesh stung his nostrils as his boot hissed an unholy melody.

Molten earth boiled from a hole and kissed his leather soles.

Several tiny depressions beneath him spewed blistering

blobs of molten rock, cascading down like tears from a celestial being.

Cross sprung over the blazing fissure, landing a mere step away from a second lava hole. He leaped to his other foot, evading it.

The soil shuddered, and the terrain beneath him erupted with tremendous power, teetering, pendulum-like, on the brink of destruction before giving way and detaching itself from the solidity of the land's surface with him on top.

Before the fiery current could carry him aloft on his rocky raft, he vaulted back across to the safety of the sturdy ground.

The chunk of earth dipped into the river of embers as it rounded a bend, where a wicked abyss engulfed it.

The scorching breath of the pit surrounded him as it carried turbulent screams from the chasm below—cries profane and intense, with no sense of remorse.

Cross had expected those wretched souls within to cry out for deliverance from their misery, acknowledging their sins with repentance. Instead, they exuded a vehement loathing that stoked his ire.

Bitterness surged through him, and he cursed the Raven who had caused him to be tossed into this nightmare. Cross vowed to clip her wings and cast her into The Inferno, the tallest mountain in all the Underworld, if she ever crossed his path again.

He now stood closer to the colossal flame-bellowing behemoth than ever before. The menacing volcano loomed before miniatures of itself, surrounding it like pawns. These smaller peaks acted as sentinels protecting the Master's domain, but no amount of subordinate cones could subdue

its might; they were merely meant to serve as sacrifices for the Inferno.

A savage roar jolted Cross. He spun to behold a monstrous hellhound yards away, poised on sinewy legs.

Scarlet fur, matted and encrusted with filth, smeared with dried red blood, and ablaze with flames, burst from beneath the saddle that held tight to its back.

Burning coals glowed from the depths of its vicious eyes, and it emitted a loud bark as it glared down at four cowering creatures trapped against the river of fire.

Even though the four creatures outnumbered the hellhound, their diminutive stature and fragile frames did not match the diabolical dog. The tallest of them scarcely reached the height of a small child and stood much shorter than even Cottontail.

The hellhound loomed over them like an enraged grizzly coveting cowering sheep. Its barks raged, quaking the earth like thunder, while its sinister growls rumbled low and feral, emanating a powerful hatred that was said to drive any mortal to insanity.

The hellhound's muscular ruach tensed and coiled as it displayed its razor-sharp fangs, readying itself to lunge at any moment and tear its prey apart with its mighty claws.

The four pitiful innocents quivered beneath its overwhelming shadow.

Cross had expected demonic beasts to lurk around the pits of Hell, yet these submissive creatures were not fearsome. They didn't belong here.

The faint clicking noises they emitted sounded reminiscent of the draggles, and he could not help but wonder if they were indeed his draggles still mysteriously following him throughout the treacherous Underworld. They

might've just spared Cross from his almost inevitable demise at the jaws of the hungry hellhound.

Cross turned away from the defenseless creatures, yet he could not shake the image of Kate—how she had acted with unrivaled courage and heroically rescued him from the rifleman's wrath. The encounter with her that night introduced a dramatic shift in his Earthly existence. Kate ferried him into a new way of life and she had been an unparalleled force for good until his end.

Cross reluctantly turned toward the draggles again.

They scampered away from the hellhound, retreating perilously closer to the river of flames.

He had already overcome insurmountable odds: defeating squals, dodging Rudimen, surviving the Raven, and escaping Sheol. And now his destination, Paradise, was just beyond the realm of Sheol. If only he could circumvent its boundaries without succumbing to its many dangers, it would lead him directly to the great wall. Nothing could stop him now except for himself. And he refused to falter after all that tireless effort. Not when success was so near.

A draggle extended its trembling hand to Cross, its glassy eyes imploring for aid.

The hellhound lunged forward like a streak of lightning and mercilessly clamped its jaws around the draggle's arm. In one swift motion, the beast gulped down the poor creature whole, leaving no trace of it behind but a fading scream and crunching bones against the hellhound's jaws.

Though death was nothing new in the Underworld, Cross had never witnessed such a cold-hearted injustice.

His stomach twisted and churned at the sight of it, and a wave of simmering anger grew inside him—an unwavering loathing for bullies—mobs like the ones who hanged his mother, tyrants like the Master who collected

souls to torture without mercy, monsters like Diamond Tooth whose pleasure came from the suffering of others, beasts like the Raven whose only concern was personal gain, even cursed souls like himself, lost in despair and petty selfishness until they found purpose powerful enough to spur them to action. Here was an opportunity to make amends for all the wrongs done to him by offering a helping hand to those who needed it most. He would no longer be a bystander.

Cross stooped, and with a swift movement, he detached a sturdy clump of solidified soil. He chucked it at the hellish canine, and it clattered against the worn saddle with a faint thud.

The hellhound jerked its head towards Cross, and the reins at its head snapped.

A crazy idea struck Cross: he could use his magical touch to tame the hellhound. Judging from its saddle, someone else had already accomplished it. But he had only ever seen hellhounds obeying demons, devils, or more powerful deities—not a mere mortal like him. And they only responded to torture and abuse, yet Cross had no interest in such tactics. He had domesticated a cornurus, considered equally as formidable as hellhounds, without using violence. But back then, he had the advantage of surprise when he crept up on Gimlet.

And the hound before him now galloped straight for him, baring jaws full of soul-crushing teeth.

Cross's heart pounded in his chest as he positioned himself to flip onto its back like the once-renowned Bronc Busters of his youth.

The hellhound lunged at him.

He ducked and seized the saddle, hoisting himself in one graceful move. His feet fit snugly into the stirrups, and

then, with a tug of the reins, the hellhound's wild mane snapped up in defiance.

Cross would have been too old for such a game if he were still alive; however, death had gifted him with a new life. He reached for the beast's head to give it his magic touch.

But it was not to be—the hellhound reared and threw him from its back in a single mighty strike.

Cross disengaged his feet from the stirrups and allowed his body to go limp, hitting the ground in a controlled roll.

A burst of fire surged from the ground just inches from his shoulder, singeing the surrounding air.

The hound lunged, shreds of fur standing straight up over its hulking spirit. It pinned Cross beneath its unforgiving paws, pressing into his chest.

They locked together in a collision of strength, their limbs a chaotic intertwining of muscle and scales as they fought to burn or be burned.

The hound's jaws clacked together, its fangs sharp enough to rend the astral layers of any spirit foolish enough to come within range. Its baleful breath singed his very being as he grappled with the beast, its fiery hide searing his astral surface on contact. Acidic saliva dripped from its gaping maw, scorching Cross's chest like charred coal.

The valiant draggles leaped onto the beast's back and sank their tiny teeth and claws through its vermin-ridden fur, ripping into its corpulent flesh.

The foul hellhound writhed and twirled to dislodge them from its back, but they clung to the hound as if glued, even as it flailed and thrashed.

But despite their effort, the hellhound flung them away and ruthlessly mauled one of the hapless draggles, shaking it mercilessly like a rag doll.

Trying to tame the hellhound with the draggles in tow was too dangerous. The poor creatures would meet their demise if Cross kept failing his attempts. He needed to slay the monstrous beast instead.

Cross stood tall and firm with newfound determination, gripping his macuahuitl. He heaved it skyward and slashed the beast's neck with all his might.

A stream of sulfurous flames erupted from the wound. The repugnant hound bellowed, spewing out scalding fire as it lunged at Cross.

He retaliated with another swing of his blade, but the fiend caught it between its fiery jaws and stripped it away from him.

Cross retreated from the wounded hellhound as it hissed and howled in pain.

The searing river of molten lava licked at his heels as chunks of earth crumbled off behind him, disappearing into the meandering stream of smoldering magma.

A fracture extended like a jagged lightning bolt between his legs then forked and branched in all directions.

Scalding froth rose through the chasm and engulfed the hellhound's broad paw. It uttered a wretched whimper before lurching back to safety.

The three draggles sprinted over to Cross, one of whom presented him with his macuahuitl.

In a fit of daring courage, Cross swung his obsidian blade, hacking at the fissure in the ground, and a surge of flames erupted from it, singeing off his hair.

A shelf departed from the land, taking Cross and the draggles with it. A searing gash now separated the four of them from the hellhound. All that remained was to steer their earthy island raft across the riverbank to safety.

Cross bent to use the macuahuitl as an oar, yet before

the obsidian could even touch the lava, the hellhound launched onto the raft.

The force of its landing propelled the island across the lava's current. The drifting terrain smashed into the banks on the opposite side and careened away from the refuge, spinning wildly.

Cross snatched up the scrawniest of the draggles, its frail spirit weightless in his grasp. With a slight flick, he propelled it through the air, across the torrential liquid flames, and onto solid ground.

Seizing the final two draggles, he repeated the motion, launching each for a successful landing. But now, the island had drifted too far for Cross to make the leap himself.

The island's edges crumbled as the gargantuan hellhound stomped across the platform. Its colossal muscles flexed as it prowled, pulverizing the fragile terrain beneath its claws.

The raft shuddered as the beast maneuvered its mountain of beaten flesh and bone. It teetered, dipping in and out of the waves of steaming magma that threatened to swallow them from beneath.

Cross clung to his side of the disintegrating rubble of land as it swept downstream, his only haven from the roiling river of molten lava that surrounded them like an ever-encroaching wall. A single misstep would have sent them plummeting into the river of volcanic heat below.

Wisps of fire seeped up, writhing their way along the outside perimeter of the raft.

The lumbering beast shrank from it in abject horror and scrambled backward from the edge of the ephemeral island.

Cross lost his footing and slid towards the hound in its precipitous retreat. He slammed into the hound's massive

frame, fire and smoke billowing around them as they collided.

"Don't be afraid of a little heat," Cross said to the hound.

The hellhound clapped its jaws in the air. But the terrifying sound was not a threat to tear him apart but was meant only to chastise him. Clearly, the beast had intentions far worse than devouring him.

A burning heat licked at Cross's feet. He pushed away from the ravenous flames.

They sauntered back to the island's center, their yin-yang balance wrought with tension until they balanced the platform, making it stable against the roaring waves of lava.

Ahead, the river of molten rock cascaded into an enormous crater in plangent splashes and plumes of steam. As they drew near it, the screams of hellish creatures that inhabited the bottomless pit echoed louder, their malice growing stronger by the second.

"Brilliant plan," Cross said to himself. "Now what?"

The hellhound bared its teeth in a primal snarl that seemed almost amused by Cross's words.

He had conversed with hellhounds during his vassalage with the President, and they, like many creatures he encountered, discerned his meaning. But what shook him about its understanding was the contempt in its growl, for it made Cross realize the hellhound was shepherding him toward the Hells.

"The Raven was right," he said, addressing the hellhound. "You used the draggles as bait. You could have burned all of us easily, but you didn't because the president ordered you to bring me back."

The hellhound chirped bird-like toward the pit, quiv-

ering in agony, as if realizing its powerlessness to resist the president. Its vicious howls echoed with grief above the rumble of the roiling lava as if the hound understood the oppressive despair of its plight.

Cross understood its predicament better than most. He would never surrender himself and willingly return to vassalage under the president.

Gusts of sweltering air beat against Cross's face as he inched toward the spitting and bubbling maw of the abyss.

The faithful draggles followed at his side, scurrying along the banks of the river. They pointed a stone ledge, extending itself horizontally from the opposite wall within the pit.

The precipice was too far to manage with a single bound, and Cross's chances of successfully reaching it were slim, yet a daring plan crystallized in his thoughts. Such an outrageous feat would be his only shot at it. He had nothing to lose.

He fastened the macuahuitl to his thigh and mounted the hellhound's saddle, ready to face whatever consequences awaited him.

The hound trembled in anticipation as Cross caressed its mane. The overwhelming stench of rot and carnage caught in his throat, but his magic touch pacified the creature just before their disintegrating island emerged at the lip of the lavafall.

With a sharp kick to its side and an audible snap of the reins, the hellhound galloped down the island's short runway and leaped into the hollow.

Cross threw himself from the saddle at the apex of their trajectory and glided across a raging chasm toward the minuscule ledge.

Yet his momentum was far too slow, and he plummeted

faster than expected, only snagging the edge of the cliff with nothing more than his fingertips.

Cross clung to the cliff face, his gaze transfixed on the hellhound hurtling towards its fiery demise, howling in anguish as it plummeted down into the depths of Hell.

Demonic spirits emerged from the lava and latched their tendrils onto the hound's struggling form, dragging it into their burning domain.

The pit churned and belched flames that did not burn souls but consumed them forever. And yet, those same souls fed upon the heat, damning them to a cruel cycle of suffering and torture for all eternity—a fate that enshrouded Cross's already heavy heart with darkness.

They swam in the lava pool, bursting with flames, the stench of their charred flesh strangling Cross as the pit spewed forth an inferno of tormenting heat, threatening to suffocate him but never ultimately ending his afterlife.

The evil entities wailed at Cross, spewing vitriolic insults and loathing, their seething hatred of him a palpable force in the sweltering air. Hundreds of voices bemoaned their dismay that he had yet to join them in the abyss of suffering, for his treacherous actions were worthy of such damnation—just like theirs. The ghastly phantasms unleashed threats of retribution that promised his inevitable enslavement to their doom.

In a macabre display, they rebuked and assailed one another, using each other as anchors to weigh down anyone trying to escape from the chasm's depths, pulling each other back down into its gaping maw.

They would have reached Cross faster had they not held each other back. But a handful of demonic spirits broke loose and clambered towards Cross with haste, but even

their frantic movements could not outpace the despairing futility of their kind.

Cross scrambled up the cliff face, his palms splitting with each desperate grasp for purchase. A searing agony burned through him like molten lava as tears streamed down his cheeks.

The summit appeared within reach but seemed ever more distant, with every merciless slice piercing deeper into his hands.

He summoned every ounce of strength to overcome the sheer force of the rock, tearing him apart, inch by agonizing inch.

The baleful specters clung to his legs with their caustic claws, and brimstone ignited along the cuffs of his trousers.

Cross retaliated with all his might, stamping on their hideous faces and grinding their skulls to piles of ash. Yet an army of them clamored to take their place.

Exhausted and on the brink of surrender, six hands reached down from above, plucking Cross away from the fiery depths and saving him from inevitable devastation.

Cross lay supine on the scorched ground, retching as he expelled the noxious fumes from his lungs.

The draggles scrambled about him, stamping out the remnants of flame that still clung to his clothing.

"Thanks." Cross heaved himself up and tenderly patted each draggle on its brainy head, careful not to squish the delicate areas or get jabbed by their crowns of horns.

His fingers were plump logs of numbness and heat preventing him from feeling them. His palms were covered in lacerations, oozing his ebony ichor.

The draggles' cherubic faces peered up at Cross, blinking their large coal eyes as he shredded parts of his shirtsleeve and used them to bind his wounded hands.

The cloth rapidly became sodden with his icy inky ichor. Both his hands ached horribly. A throbbing ran through each swollen digit. Yet, all pain had become a familiar load Cross had learned to leverage long ago.

"So, you're the infamous draggles, huh?" he asked his saviors.

The draggles purred and tilted their heads upon their willowy necks, resembling a pup attempting to comprehend its master's utterances, only to be left wanting.

"Draggles is just what I call you because I don't know what you… Can you even understand me?"

The draggles pranced exuberantly, their sinuous figures weaving harmoniously like a spellbinding waltz.

"But you don't talk."

The draggle trio revolved in a vigorous pirouette, their zest reminiscent of newly born rabbits frolicking in a meadow. Their childlike delight was palpable as they danced with uninhibited enthusiasm.

Their silken purrs melodized through the air, creating a web of tranquility that hugged Cross. It was like a sweet lament, filling the atmosphere with an umbral aura of solace and comfort. Their vibrant energy could not help but make Cross smile.

The three draggles sniffed Cross, their silent inquisitiveness matching his own.

He wanted to ask the draggles why they had been stalking him and why they had chosen this specific moment to reveal themselves. But, of course, they couldn't articulate an answer. He was still in awe of how the skeletal draggles had rescued him from the calamitous pit with such ease—even though three of them joined forces, each one was too slender and bony as if fashioned entirely of bone and air—no flesh, almost resembling malnourished

children in that regard. Their combined weight was insignificant, barely able to support their own weight, let alone carry his. Yet they did it with little effort.

One of them scrutinized the macuahuitl with the curiosity of a young child, prodding its scaly claw through the hole in the wooden paddle where the Raven's rope dart had pierced through it.

"The Raven said there were five of you, but there were only four of you before the hellhound ate—" Cross held his tongue before speaking of the fate that had befallen the poor draggles.

Now, only three remained. Their mournful countenances drooped in grief over their companion, who had just succumbed to the callous gullet of a hellhound and whatever despicable brutality had befallen their fifth member.

Cross's heart weighed like a leaden burden in his chest as he acknowledged they would not survive the Underworld if they remained with him. He could not bear the thought of them suffering the same fate as all his other loyal companions on his harrowing voyage.

"That's too bad about your friends," he said. "You take care of yourselves, okay."

Cross limped away from the draggles, taking measured steps along the river of molten rock as he left his sorrowful entourage trailing in his wake.

But the stringy creatures loyally trailed behind like lost puppies needing rescue.

He halted and whirled around, facing them with an air of misgiving. "Look, you saved my hide. I saved yours. We're even."

Cross stomped away from the draggles, his heavy boots thudding in a determined march like a drumbeat leading a revolution.

The draggles followed suit with lighter steps, pattering almost like a marching band but out of synch with Cross's rhythm. Still, their loyalty to him was steadfast.

"Look!" he said. "Nice creatures like you should never be friends with a hard case like me. It was better for you when you were far away. There were more of you. Don't you get it? The sort of thing with the hellhound happens to me every day. You don't want any part of that. Trust me. The three of you should git!"

Cross whipped his hand through the air, lashing out with a wild flurry of motion. He restrained himself from striking the innocent creatures yet was prepared to assail them if they failed to heed his warnings. His ruach tensed like a coiled spring, ready to lash out and deliver an offensive punch that could drive them far away from him and the danger that pursued him.

The draggles huddled together in a trembling embrace. A labored bellowing rose from the trio, a mournful call that welled up from within them as one unified voice. Their long and spindly limbs quivered as they crouched together, their black eyes brimming with confusion and terror.

"Go on now," Cross said. "I ain't your pappy. Scat!"

The draggles scattered like a thousand raindrops against an iron roof, their piercing squeals of panic trailing off into the wind.

Cross felt their absence the instant the beloved draggles disappeared behind one of the many menacing crags that formed the pits of Hell.

Mama had just warned him he would need others to join his cause, but in a foolish attempt to protect them, he stupidly drove them away.

Now an unbearable pang of guilt washed over him. No matter what he did to shelter them from harm, they would

find no safety in the Underworld—danger and despair lurked in every crevice.

Had Mr. Carson chosen to act in the same manner, then Cross would have hung beside his mother that fateful night.

It was not too late for him to recover the remnants of his dignity and honor in his loyal subjects' eyes.

Burdened with regret, Cross chased after the draggles, as they had remained staunchly committed to following in his wake all these years.

🛑 THE END OF THE LINE

(WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?)

This is where the free preview ends.

But this story is just getting started.

And I can't leave you hanging on a cliffhanger like this.

(Actually, I can. That's my job.)

If you want to see what happens to the draggles, and if Cross ever gets his revenge on the Raven... you need the rest of the book.

If you want to see how this ends, you can grab the full 37-chapter novel right now by clicking the link below.

👉 **UNLOCK THE FULL NOVEL AT:**
vaudeverse.com/access/starter-pack/